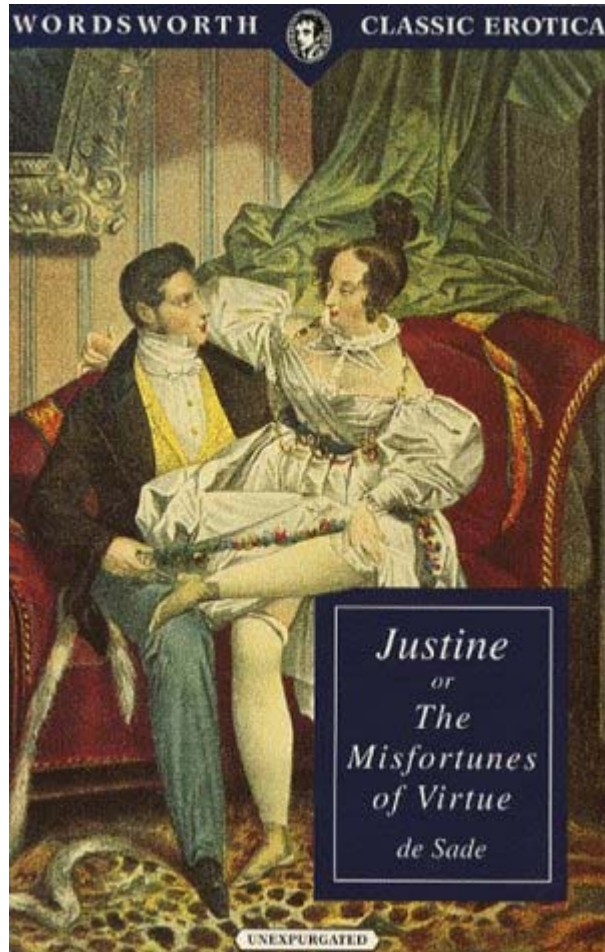


**Marquis De Sade**

**Justine or The Misfortunes Of Virtue**



# Justine Or The Misfortunes of Virtue

By the Marquis de Sade

The ultimate triumph of philosophy would be to cast light upon the mysterious ways in which Providence moves to achieve the designs it has for man, and then to deduce therefrom some plan of conduct which would enable that two-legged wretch, forever buffeted by the whims of the Supreme Being who is said to direct his steps no less despotically, to know how to interpret what Providence decrees for him and to select a path to follow which would forestall the bizarre caprices of the Fate to which a score of different names are given but whose nature is still uncertain.

For if, taking social conventions as our starting-point and remaining faithful to the respect for them which education has bred in us, it should by mischance occur that through the perversity of others we encounter only thorns while evil persons gather nothing but roses, then will not a man, possessed of a stock of virtue insufficient to allow him to rise above the thoughts inspired by these unhappy circumstances, calculate that he would do as well to swim with the torrent as against it? And will he not say that when virtue, however fine a thing it be, unhappily proves too weak to resist evil, then virtue becomes the worst path he can follow, and will he not conclude that in an age that is utterly corrupt, the best policy is to do as others do? Or if you prefer, let the man have a degree of learning and allow him to abuse the knowledge he has acquired: will he not then say, like the angel Jesrad in Voltaire's *Zadig*, that there is no evil from which some good does not flow? And will he not add of his own accord that, since in the imperfect fabric of this corrupt world of ours there is a sum of evil equal to the sum of good, the continuing equilibrium of the world requires that there be as many good people as wicked people, and that it follows that in the general scheme of things it matters not if such and such a man be good or wicked; that since misfortune persecutes virtue, and prosperity is the almost invariable accompaniment of vice (a matter of complete indifference to Nature), then is it not infinitely better to side with the wicked who prosper than with the good who perish? It is therefore important to guard against the dangerous sophisms of philosophy, and essential to show that when examples of suffering virtue are thrust before a corrupt soul in which principles of goodness are not entirely extinct, then even that straying soul may be returned to goodness as surely as if the road to virtue were littered with the most glittering prizes and the most flattering rewards. It is of course a cruel thing to have to depict the heap of misfortunes which overwhelms the sweet, feeling woman whose respect for virtue is unmatched, and on the other hand to portray the sparkling good fortune of her sister who scorned virtue all her life. And yet if some good should come from our sketching of these two pictures, shall we take ourselves to task for laying them before the public? Shall we feel remorse for establishing an exact account which will enable the wise man, who reads with profit and draws the ineffable lesson of submission to the will of Providence, to answer part of his secret stock of unanswered questions and heed the fatal warning that it is often to redirect our steps to the path of duty that Heaven strikes those next to us who best appear to have discharged theirs?

Such are the sentiments which led us to take up our pen, and it is in deference to their unimpeachable sincerity that we ask of our readers a modicum of attention and sympathy for the misfortunes of unhappy, wretched Justine.

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The Comtesse de Lorsange was one of those votaries of Venus who owe their fortune to a bewitching face and a generous measure of loose conduct and underhand dealing, and whose letters patent of nobility, however imposing, being concocted out of the impertinence of those who seek them and the stupid credulity of those who issue them, exist only in the archives of Cythera.<sup>1</sup> She had dark hair, a vivacious manner, a fine figure, marvellously expressive black eyes, much wit, and above all that fashionable lack of religious belief which, lending extra savour to passion, makes the woman suspected of harbouring it a special object of attraction. She had nevertheless been given the finest of educations. Daughter of a merchant in a large way of business in the rue Saint-Honoré, she was brought up with her sister three years her junior in one of the best convents in Paris where, until the age of 15, she was never denied good counsel or teachers nor good books or talents. At an age which can prove fatal to the virtue of any young woman, she lost everything in a single day. Cruel bankruptcy brought her father to so ruinous a pass that his only means of escaping the most dreadful fate was to flee in haste to England, leaving his daughters in the care of his wife who died of grief within the space of one week after his departure. The one or two relatives who remained deliberated on what was to be done with the girls. Their inheritance amounting to about a hundred écus apiece, it was decided that the convent doors be thrown open to them, that they be given their due and allowed to make their own way. Mine de Lorsange, then known as Juliette, was already to all intents and purposes as mature in character and mind as she was to be at 30, which was her age at the time we tell this story. She seemed alive only to the sensation of being free and did not pause for a moment to reflect upon the cruel reverses which had snapped the chains which had bound her. But her sister Justine, who had just turned 12, gloomy and melancholic by disposition yet blessed with surprising gentleness and sensitivity, having none of her sister's artfulness and guile but the ingenuousness, candour, and honesty which were to make her stumble into many traps, Justine felt the full horror of her situation. Her face was quite unlike Juliette's. Where the features of the one were all artifice, cunning, and coquetry, the other's were remarkable for their modesty, refinement, and shyness. A virginal air, large, engaging blue eyes, dazzling skin, a slender, well-shaped figure, a voice to move the heart, teeth of ivory, and beautiful fair hair—so much, in outline sketch, for the younger sister whose simple grace and delightful expression were of too fine, too delicate a stamp not to elude the brush which would capture them entire.

Both were given twenty-four hours to quit the convent and complete freedom to fend for themselves with their hundred écus. Overjoyed to be her own mistress, Juliette attempted briefly to dry Justine's tears, but seeing that she would not succeed, left off comforting her and fell to scolding. She told her she was a foolish girl and said that given their ages and pretty faces, it was unheard of for girls to starve to death. She quoted the instance of one of their neighbour's daughters who had escaped from her father's house and was now sumptuously kept by a tax-farmer<sup>2</sup> and lived in great style in Paris. Justine was horrified by this pernicious example. She said she would die rather than follow her lead and categorically refused to share a lodging with her sister Juliette once she saw that she had set her mind on the kind of abominable life she had commended so warmly.

And so the moment it was clear that their intentions were so different, the sisters went their separate ways, making no promises to meet again. Would Juliette, who, she claimed, would

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<sup>1</sup> One of seven Ionian islands which, in Greek mythology, was sacred to Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. In the imagery of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French gallantry, Cythera stood for sexual licence.

<sup>2</sup> Was a private citizen who brought from the King a licence to raise taxes in a given area to an agreed amount.

become a great lady, ever agree to have anything more to do with the foolish girl whose *virtuous*, squeamish inclinations would dishonour her? And for her part would Justine put her moral purity at risk by associating with a perverse creature who would surely be a victim of lewdness and public debauchery? And so each made provision for their money to be paid and left the convent the next day as arranged.

As a little girl, Justine had been coddled by her mother's seamstress and, thinking that this woman would be moved by her plight, sought her out, told her of her distressed circumstances, asked for work, and was sent away with harsh words .

'Great Heaven!' said the poor creature, 'must the first steps I take in the world come so soon and so surely to grief? This woman loved me once. Why then does she turn me away now? Because, alas, I am an orphan and penniless, because I no longer have means to call on and because people are valued only in terms of the help or profit that may be got out of them.'

When she realized this, Justine called on her parish priest and asked him for advice. But the charitable churchman answered ambiguously, saying that the parish was overburdened and that it was not possible for her to receive a portion of the poor-box, but that if she were prepared to work for him he would gladly give her lodging in his house. But as, in so saying, the holy man had placed his hand beneath her chin and gave her far too worldly a kiss for a man of the cloth, Justine, understanding his meaning only too well, pulled back sharply and said:

'Sir, I do not ask for charity or a position as servant. Too little time has gone by since my station in life was far above the lowly circumstances in which such favours have to be begged for, for me to be reduced to soliciting them now! I asked you for the guidance I need in my youth and misfortune, and you would have me purchase it with a crime.'

Angered by this word, the priest showed her the door and callously turned her out. Justine, twice spurned on the very day she was sentenced to a life of isolation, entered a house with a notice in the window, took a small furnished room which she paid for in advance, and was now at least able to surrender undisturbed to the mortification engendered by her circumstances and the cruelty of the few people to whom her unlucky star had led her.

The reader will allow us to leave her in her dark coop for a while and return to Juliette so that we may tell as briefly as possible how, from her unremarkable beginnings on leaving the convent, she became within the space of fifteen years a lady possessing a title, an income of 30,000 livres, gorgeous jewels, two or three houses in Paris and in the country, plus, for the time being, the heart, purse, and confidence of Monsieur de Corville, a Councillor of State, a man enjoying the highest credit and poised to become a Minister of the Crown. Her path had been thorny. Of this there can be no doubt: it is only by serving the most shameful, bitter apprenticeship that girls of her sort make their way. The woman who today occupies the bed of a prince may well still bear upon her person the humiliating marks of the brutality of the depraved libertines into whose hands she was thrown by her tentative first steps, her youth, and her inexperience.

On leaving the convent, Juliette had promptly gone off in search of a woman she had heard mentioned by her friend, the former neighbour who had taken to debauchery. She had kept the address and appeared shamelessly on the doorstep with her bundle under her arm, her plain dress in disarray and with the prettiest face that ever was and the air of one who was only too willing to learn. She told her story to the woman and pleaded with her to grant her the same protection that she had bestowed on her friend a few years earlier.

'How old are you, child?' asked Madame Du Buisson.

'I shall be 15 in a few days.'

‘And has any man or woman . . . ?’

‘O no, Madame, I swear.’

‘But sometimes, you know, in convents—an almoner? a nun? a friend? I shall need proof.’

‘Pray proceed as you think fit, Madame, and you will have all the proof you want.’

Madame Du Buisson perched a pair of spectacles on her nose and, after satisfying herself of the exact state of things, said to Juliette:

‘Well, child, you may stay here. Follow my advice strictly, be accommodating in observing my rules, be clean and thrifty, behave candidly with me, courteously with your companions and deceitfully with men, and under my direction you shall be in a position a few years hence to withdraw from this place to a room of your own with a chest for your clothes, a pier-glass, and a maid, and the art which you acquire in my house will provide you with the means of procuring the rest.’

Madame Du Buisson took charge of Juliette’s little bundle and asked if she had any money about her. Juliette having volunteered too promptly that she had a hundred écus, her dear Mama pocketed that too, telling her young pupil that she would invest it for her, for young ladies should not be allowed to have money, since money provided the means for wrong-doing and, in so corrupt a century, a girl of good character and family should take care to avoid anything that might cause her to stumble and topple into a snare. Once this sermon was done, the newcomer was presented to her companions, she was shown to her chamber in the house and the very next day her virginity was put up for sale. Within a space of four months, the same merchandise was sold in turn to eighty persons who each paid as though for unused goods, and it was only at the expiry of her thorny novitiate that Juliette was granted entry to the sisterhood. From that moment on, she was truly acknowledged as a full daughter of the nunnery and bore her share of its lewd and exhausting labours—in effect a further novitiate. If during the first, Juliette, apart from a few lapses, had served nature, she now neglected nature’s laws during the second and submitted to criminal refinements, loathsome pleasures, secret, filthy debauches, shocking, bizarre tastes, humiliating fancies, all of which were born, first, of the search for pleasures free of all risk to health and, second, of pernicious Surfeit which blunts the imagination and leaves it no scope or room except through excess and no means of satisfaction save in depravity. Juliette’s morals were totally corrupted in her new school and her soul was thoroughly depraved by the victories she observed borne off by vice. She felt that since she was made for crime, then at the very least she should set her sights on the highest peak and refuse to languish in her present lowly condition which required her to commit the same foul acts and be no less degraded, but brought her nothing like the same profit. She took the fancy of an old, thoroughly depraved nobleman who at first had singled her out for a mere quarter of an hour’s amusement. She managed to beguile him into keeping her in the most opulent manner and at last she began to be seen in theatres and in the fashionable walks on an equal footing with the luminaries of the Order of Cythera. She was looked at, her words were repeated, she was an object of envy, and the jade went about her business so well that in four years she ruined three men, the poorest of whom had an income of 100,000 écus. It was enough to make her reputation. Such is the blindness of people nowadays that the more impure one of these unfortunates shows herself to be, the keener they are to be on her list. It is as though the depth of her depravity and corruption is the only yardstick by which the feelings which they lavish so shamelessly on her in public are to be measured.

Juliette had just turned 20 when a certain Count de Lorsange, a nobleman from the province of Anjou aged about 40, became so smitten with her that he resolved upon making her his wife

since he had not fortune enough to keep her as his mistress. He made over an income of 12,000 livres to her, and arranged that the remainder of his fortune, a further 8,000, would be hers should he die before she did; he gave her a house, servants, and a retinue and conferred on her a degree of respectability in society which ensured that within two or three years her beginnings were forgotten. It was then that the wretched Juliette, oblivious to all the decent promptings of her birth and sound education, corrupted by evil books and evil counsel, impatient to enjoy her advantages alone, to have a name and to be rid of all chains, dared yield to the culpable notion of abridging her husband's life . . . She conceived her plan and, regrettably, executed it with such stealth that she was able both to elude the arm of the law and to bury all traces of her abominable crime along with her hindrance of a husband.

Once more in possession of her freedom and now a Countess, Madame de Lorsange took up her old habits, but thinking that she cut some figure in the world, she put a measure of decency into her proceedings. She was no longer a kept woman but a rich widow who gave gay supper-parties to which the ornaments of town and court were only too happy to be admitted—yet she could be bedded for 200 louis and bought for 500 a month. Until she was 26, she continued to make brilliant conquests, ruined three ambassadors, four tax-farmers, two bishops, and three Knights of Royal Orders and, since it is rare to stop at one crime especially when it has turned out successfully, Juliette, the wretched, culpable Juliette sank ever deeper into the mire with two more crimes of the same kind as the first; one, that she might rob one of her lovers of a sum of money put into her keeping by him without his family's knowing which she sequestered to her own profit by means of her odious crime, the other, that she might the sooner receive a bequest of 100,000 livres which one of her admirers had written into his will in the name of a third party who was appointed to hand the money over to her against a small consideration. To these horrors, Madame de Lorsange added two or three infanticides: considerations of all kinds—fear of spoiling her pretty figure or a need to safeguard twin amours running in tandem—led her to resort on several occasions to abortion. These crimes, like the others, went undetected and did nothing to prevent this scheming and ambitious woman from finding new dupes daily and swelling her fortune at every turn as her crimes accumulated. It is regrettably only too true that prosperity may accompany crime and that even in the most freely embraced state of depravity and corruption the thread of life may be gilded by what men call happiness. But let not this cruel and unavoidable reality be a cause for dismay. Let not the truth (of which we shall presently furnish an example) that it is on the contrary vice which everywhere pursues and attacks virtue, trouble the hearts of honest, decent persons. The prosperity of crime is more apparent than real. Independently of Providence which of necessity punishes his ostensible success, a guilty man harbours in the recesses of his heart a worm which gnaws at him unceasingly, makes it impossible for him to bask in the felicity which bathes his existence, and leaves him instead with only the grievous memory of the crimes by which he came by it. And against the misfortunes which snap at virtue's heels, the unhappy man who is persecuted by Fate has the consolation of a clear conscience and the inner joy which comes from the purity of his soul: together these are a prompt compensation for the injustice of men.

The affairs of Madame de Lorsange had reached this pitch when Monsieur de Corville who, at 50, enjoyed the credit which we have already mentioned, resolved to devote himself entirely to her and to keep her for himself alone. What with thoughtfulness or attentions on his part and discretion on hers, he had succeeded and had been living with her for four years together on exactly the same footing as if she were his legally married wife, when a superb estate which he had just bought for her near Montargis prompted in both the desire to spend a few months of the

summer there. One June evening, the fine weather tempted them to push on by foot as far as the town and, feeling too weary to return in the manner in which they had come, they entered the inn which serves as a staging-post for the Lyons coach, thinking to send a rider thence to fetch them a carriage from their chateau. They were resting in a cool, low-ceilinged room which looked out on to the courtyard when the coach we have mentioned drove in. Observing travellers is a natural pastime; anyone with an idle moment to spare will gladly occupy it in this way when the occasion arises. Madame de Lorsange stood up, her lover did likewise, and both watched as the passengers entered the inn. It appeared that no one was left on board when a constable, leaping down from the jump-seat, helped to hand down from one of his colleagues who had been riding next to him a young woman of about 26 or 27 with a cheap calico shawl about her person and her hands tied together like a criminal's. At a cry of horror and astonishment which escaped from Madame de Lorsange, the young woman turned, revealing features so sweet and delicate and so fine and shapely a figure that Monsieur de Corville and his mistress could not restrain a desire to intervene on behalf of so wretched a creature. Monsieur de Corville approached and asked one of the constables what the unhappy creature had done.

'Well sir,' replied the gendarme, 'she is accused of committing three or four major crimes, to wit, theft, murder, and arson, but I don't mind admitting that neither my colleague here nor myself ever had less stomach for an escort detail. She is the sweetest creature and I'd say the straightest too.'

'Is that so?' said Monsieur de Corville. 'Perhaps she has been the victim of some mistake. Mistakes are not unknown in magistrates' courts. Where were the crimes committed?'

'At an inn three leagues outside Lyons. She was tried at Lyons and is on her way to Paris for confirmation of sentence. Then she'll travel back to Lyons and be executed there.'

Madame de Lorsange had drawn near, overheard what was said, and now whispered to Monsieur de Corville that she would very much like to hear the story of the young woman's misfortunes from her own lips. Monsieur de Corville, sharing her wish, spoke of it to her escort and made himself known. They raised no objection. Madame de Lorsange and Monsieur de Corville now resolved to spend the night at Montargis and asked to be given a suitable apartment with an adjacent room for the constables. Monsieur de Corville took full responsibility for the prisoner. Her hands were untied and she was shown into the room of Madame de Lorsange and Monsieur de Corville. Her guards dined and went to bed in the adjoining chamber. When the poor unfortunate had been persuaded to take a little sustenance, Madame de Lorsange, who could not prevent herself from feeling the keenest interest in her and doubtless was telling herself: 'This wretched and perhaps innocent creature is treated like a criminal while everything I touch turns to gold—and I am assuredly far guiltier than she.'—Madame de Lorsange, I say, the moment she saw that the young woman was a little recovered and in some measure consoled by the attentions shown to her and the concern displayed on her behalf, persuaded her to relate the circumstances which had, notwithstanding her air of honesty and goodness, brought her to so terrible a pass.

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The story of my life, Madame (said the beautiful, unhappy creature to the Countess), would furnish you with the most striking example of the misfortunes of innocence. To tell it would be to accuse Providence and complain of its workings. It would be a sin of a kind and I cannot bring myself to ...

Tears then streamed from the eyes of the unfortunate young woman, but after letting them flow freely for a moment, she began her story in these terms.

With your leave, I shall withhold my name. I come of a family which, though undistinguished, Madame, was respectable, and I was not born to the mortifications which have been the source of the larger part of my misfortunes. I lost both my parents when very young. With the modest means they left at my disposal, I had thought to obtain an honest situation, but constantly rejecting offers which were far from honest, I exhausted my small inheritance more quickly than I realized. The poorer I grew, the more reviled I was. The more I stood in need of help, the smaller grew my hopes of finding it or the more frequently was it held out to me in unworthy and shameful forms. Of all the hardships which I endured in my distressed condition, of all the horrid propositions that were made to me, I shall mention only what befell me in the house of Monsieur Dubourg, one of the richest merchants in the capital. I had been directed to him as the kind of man whose wealth and credit were most suited and best able to alleviate my fate. But those who had advised me thus either sought to deceive me or else were unaware of the hardness of the man's heart or the depravity of his morals. After waiting two hours in his antechamber, I was shown into his presence. Monsieur Dubourg, who was about 45 years of age, had just risen from his bed and was wearing a loose-fitting robe which barely covered his state of undress. Being about to have his peruke arranged upon his head, he dismissed his valet and asked me what I wanted.

'Alas, Monsieur,' I answered, 'I am a poor orphan who, though not yet 14, nevertheless am acquainted with all the degrees of misfortune.' I then told him of my setbacks, my difficulties in finding a situation, the unhappy circumstance of my having spent the little money I had in seeking a place, the rejections I had met with, even the difficulties I had encountered in finding needlework to do either in a dressmaker's shop or in my own room, and I spoke of the hopes I had conceived of his helping me to find a means of earning a living.

After listening to me most attentively, Monsieur Dubourg asked me if I had always been a good girl.

'I should neither be so poor nor have fallen so low, Monsieur,' I said, 'had I ever wanted to be otherwise.'

At this, he said: 'My child, on what grounds do you believe that Wealth should extend a helping hand seeing that you serve its purposes in no way whatsoever?'

'Serve, Monsieur? But I ask only to be of service.'

'The services which a child like you can contribute to the running of a house are of no great weight, though I was not thinking of those services. You are neither old enough nor sufficiently presentable for me to find you a position as you ask. But if you were to adopt a less ludicrously strict attitude, you might aspire to a modest future in any libertine circle. And it is in that direction that you had now best move. The virtue of which you make so much serves no useful purpose in the real world. You can tout it around as much as you like, but you will find that it won't even buy you a glass of water. Those of us who actually dole out charity, which is something we do as little as possible and then only with the greatest reluctance, want to be compensated for the money which is taken out of our pockets. Now, what can a little girl like you do to repay the help she receives, if not to agree to whatever is asked of her?'

'O sir, so there are neither philanthropy nor decent feelings in men's hearts?'

'No, not a great deal, my child. The mania for obliging others without asking anything in return is now a thing of the past. It flattered one's pride momentarily, of course. But since there is nothing so illusory and so quickly dispelled as pleasure, people have begun demanding more



palpable gratifications. They felt that in the case of a girl like yourself, for example, it was far more worth while to take a return on the moneys advanced in the form of the pleasures afforded by libertinage than to take pride in having acted charitably. The reputation of a liberal, charitable, generous man is, to my way of thinking, as nothing compared to the smallest hint of the pleasure you could give me. In consideration of which—and here my views are those of almost everyone of my tastes and age—you will understand, child, that any help I give you will be proportionate to your agreeing to do whatever it pleases me to ask of you.’

‘What hardness of heart, sir! Do you imagine that Heaven will not punish you for your callousness?’

‘You are young and know nothing, but hear this: Heaven is the last thing in the world which interests us. Whether what we do on earth pleases Heaven or not is the last thing which gives us pause. Being only too aware of how little power Heaven has over men, we defy it daily without a qualm. Indeed, our passions acquire true enchantment only when they transgress Heaven’s designs most outrageously, or at least what simpletons assure us are its designs, though in reality they form the illusory chain by which hypocrites and impostors have always set out to deceive and subjugate the strong.

‘But sir, do not such principles mean that the unfortunate man is doomed to perish?’

‘What does that signify? France has more subjects than it needs. The Government sees everything in broad terms and is not overly concerned with individuals provided that the machinery runs smoothly overall.’

‘But do you think that children respect their fathers when they are badly treated?’

‘What does the love of children who serve no useful purpose matter to a father who already has far too many?’

‘So it would have been better if we had been strangled at birth?’

‘Probably. But enough of politics which you cannot possibly understand. Why do you complain of your fate when you could so easily change it?’

‘But Heavens, at what cost!’

‘The cost merely of an idle fancy, of a thing which has no value beyond the price which your pride sets upon it. But let us leave aside this question too and simply keep to what concerns us both at this juncture. You lay great store by this idle fancy, don’t you, while I attach very little importance to it and so shall not fight you for it. The duties which I should expect of you, and for which you will be reasonably, but not excessively paid, will be of a quite different order. I shall give you into my housekeeper’s charge. You will answer to her and each morning, in my presence, either this woman or my valet will subject you to . . .’

O Madame, how shall I convey this execrable proposition to you? I was too humiliated to take it in as it was being made, and my head spun, so to speak, as the words were said . . . Being too ashamed to repeat them now, I beg you to be good enough to imagine the rest. . . The cruel man spoke the names of high-ranking churchmen and I was to be their victim.

‘That is as much as I can do for you, my child,’ the wicked man went on as he stood up with no thought for decency, ‘and even so all I can promise you for the duration of these proceedings, which will be always protracted and painful, is to support you for two years. You are now 14. At 16 you will be free to seek your fortune elsewhere. Until then, you will be clothed and fed and will receive one louis each month. It is a very fair offer: I have not been giving as much to the girl you will replace. Of course, she did not possess intact the virtue by which you set such great store and which I reckon to be worth, as you see, about 50 écus a year, a rather larger sum than was given to your predecessor. Think it over carefully, pay special attention to the poverty from

which I should save you, and reflect that in this unjust society of which you are part, those who do not have enough to live on must suffer if they are to earn enough to get by. Like them you will suffer too, I grant, but you will earn far more than the vast majority of them.'

The monster's appalling words had inflamed his passions. He seized me by the collar of my dress and told me that on this first occasion he himself would show me what was involved . . . But my plight gave me courage and strength, I managed to struggle free and, as I rushed to the door:

'Loathsome man!' I cried as I fled, 'may Heaven which you offend so cruelly punish you one day as you deserve for your odious barbarity. You are not worthy of the wealth which you abuse so vilely, nor even of the air you breathe in a world made foul by your brutal ways.'

I was returning dejectedly to my lodging plunged into the black, depressing thoughts to which the cruelty and corruption of men inevitably give rise, when my eye seemed for a moment to catch a glimpse of fair weather. The woman with whom I lodged was acquainted with my distress. She now came up to me and said that she had at last discovered a house where I would be gladly received, provided my behaviour was beyond reproach.

'O Heavens, Madame,' I said, embracing her ecstatically, 'that is a condition I should myself insist upon! I accept most gladly!'

The man I was to serve was an elderly money-lender who, it was said, had grown rich not only by lending against pledges but by robbing all and sundry with impunity each time he saw it was safe for him to do so. He lived in a first-floor apartment in the rue Quincampoix with an aged mistress he called his wife who was at least as spiteful as he.

'Sophie,' the miser said to me, 'Sophie' (this was the name I had taken to conceal my own), 'the foremost virtue which I require in my house is honesty. If ever even the tenth part of a denier should find its way into your pocket, I shall have you hanged, do you hear Sophie? hanged beyond reviving. If my wife and I enjoy a few comforts in our old age, they are the fruit of our unending labours and extreme abstemiousness. Do you eat a great deal, my child?'

'A few ounces of bread a day, sir,' I replied, 'some water and a little soup when I am fortunate enough to have it.'

'Soup! Good God! Soup! Look at her, my dear,' the old miser said to his wife, 'and see to what a pass the taste for luxury has brought us! Here's a slavey who has been looking for a place for a year, starving for a twelve-month, and she asks for soup! Soup is something we hardly ever make, just once, on Sundays, and we have been working like Turks these forty years. You will make do with three ounces of bread a day, my girl, half a bottle of river water, one of my wife's cast-off dresses every eighteen months for you to turn into petticoats, and three écus for your pay at the end of the year if we are happy with the work you do, if you are as economical as we are and, finally, if, by your orderliness and good husbandry, you help the business to prosper. We do not require much in the way of attendance and there is no servant but you. All you have to do is to polish and clean the six rooms in the apartment three times a week, make my wife's bed and mine, answer the door, powder my wig, dress my wife's hair, look after the dog, the cat, and the parrot, attend to the kitchen, shine the pans whether they have been used or not, help my wife when she makes us a bite to eat, and spend the rest of the day washing, darning stockings, trimming hats, and making other household oddments. As you see, there's not much to it, Sophie. You'll have plenty of time to yourself and we shall not stand in your way if you wish to use it for your private purposes and also to do your personal washing and make whatever clothes you may need.'

You will have no difficulty in imagining, Madame, that only one in circumstances as reduced

as those in which I now found myself would ever accept such a place. Not only was there infinitely more work than my age and strength allowed me to undertake, but would I be able to live on what I had been offered? I took care, however, to avoid making difficulties and moved in that same evening.

If in the parlous circumstances I now find myself at this moment, Madame, I had half a mind to afford you a moment's amusement, though by rights I should have no thought but to interest your heart in my favour, I think I can say I should entertain you royally with some account of the miserly habits I was witness to in that house. But a calamity so terrible in its consequences for me stood waiting at the finish of my second year there that it is with no little difficulty, when I think back, that I now bring myself to relate a few humorous details before telling you of the setback I mentioned. So let me say, Madame, that no lights were ever lit in that house. Fortunately, the apartment of my master and mistress looked on to the street lamp outside and this freed them of the need to have any other glim: no lamp of any other kind served to light them to bed. They made no use of linen. My master's coat, like my mistress's dress, was furnished with a pair of cuffs stitched to the cloth at the sleeve-ends and these I washed each Saturday evening so that they were presentable of a Sunday; there were no sheets or table napkins, to save on laundry-work, always a costly item in any household according to Monsieur Du Harpin, my respected master. No wine was served, water being, as Madame Du Harpin held, the natural drink of the first men on earth and the only drink prescribed by Nature. Whenever bread was cut, a basket was placed beneath to catch the crumbs that fell, and to them anything left over from meals was carefully added, the whole being fried together on Sundays with a little rancid butter, this constituting festive fare for the day of rest. Clothes and upholstery were not to be beaten, for fear of wearing them out, but were to be lightly switched with a feather duster. The shoes worn by my master and mistress were bottomed with iron, and both husband and wife still clung reverently to the footwear which had served them on their wedding-day. But there was one practice, odder still by far, which I was required to follow regularly once a week. The apartment boasted one room of fair size whose walls were unpapered; with a knife, I was required to scrape a quantity of plaster from them which I then passed through a fine sieve, what remained from this operation being employed as the powder with which I dressed my master's wig and my mistress's hair each morning. But would to God that these shameful practices were the only ones to which these dreadful people subscribed. Nothing is more natural than the wish to preserve what one has, but what is rather less so is the desire to double one's property by adding to it property belonging to other people, and it was not long before I perceived that it was in this manner, and this manner alone, that Monsieur Du Harpin had grown so rich. Living on the floor above was a gentleman with a decent competency, being possessed of rather fine jewels. Now perhaps because he lived so near or perhaps because his effects had already passed through his hands, the extent of his wealth was well known to my master. I often heard him and his wife say how much they regretted a particular gold casket worth 30 or 40 louis which would certainly have remained in his possession had the attorney he employed known his business better; to make up the loss of the returned casket, the honest Monsieur Du Harpin now proposed to steal it and I was charged with the business.

After reading me a long lesson on the trivial nature of stealing and on the useful role it plays in society where theft redresses a balance destroyed by inequalities in the distribution of wealth, Monsieur Du Harpin gave me a counterfeit key and assured me that it fitted the door to his neighbour's apartment; that I should find the casket in a cabinet which was never locked; that I could purloin it without running any kind of risk; and that for rendering such an important

service, I should have an extra écu on my wages for the next two years.

‘O sir!’ I cried, ‘is it possible that a master should seek to corrupt his servant so? What is there to prevent me from turning against you the same weapons which you place in my hand, for what reasonable objection could you make were I to rob you according to your own principles?’

Monsieur Du Harpin, much taken aback by my answer, did not dare insist further but, nursing a secret rancour against me, said that what he had done was intended to test me, that it was fortunate indeed that I had not agreed to his insidious scheme, for had I succumbed then I would have been as good as hanged. I settled for this reply but from that time forward I was aware both of the misfortunes which hung over my head as a result of such a proposition and of my error in answering him so categorically. But there was no middle path: I had either to commit the crime he spoke of or to reject what he proposed out of hand. Had I then had a little more experience of the world, I should have quitted the house at once. But it was already written in the book of my destiny that each honest prompting of my nature would be repaid by misfortune. I was therefore forced to submit to fate, it being impossible that I should ever escape it.

Monsieur Du Harpin allowed close upon a month to pass, that is until about the time of my completing a second year in his household, without mentioning or giving the slightest sign of ill will towards me for having refused his bidding, when one evening, withdrawing to my chamber after my work was done, there to enjoy a few hours of calm, I suddenly heard my door broken down and not without fright observed Monsieur Du Harpin leading a police officer and four men of the watch to my bedside.

‘Do your duty, constable,’ said he to the officer of the law, ‘the hussy has robbed me of a diamond worth a thousand écus. You will find it in her room or about her person. It’s here all right.’

‘I, sir, steal from you!’ said I dismayed, throwing myself to the foot of my bed. ‘Ah, who better than you knows how offensive I find the very thought of such things and how impossible it would be for me to have stooped so low!’

But Monsieur Du Harpin, who made a great deal of noise so that my words should go unheard, continued to oversee the search and the wretched ring was found in one of my mattresses. Against evidence so incontrovertible there was no reply. I was immediately seized, bound, and led to the Palace prison, during which time I could not gain the smallest hearing for anything I might have said in my defence.

The trial of any hapless person who lacks credit or protection is a quickly expedited business in France where virtue is thought incompatible with poverty and the ill fortune of the accused is proof sufficient of guilt in the eyes of magistrates. An unjust assumption persuades courts that whoever was most likely to have perpetrated the crime is in fact the person who committed it; sentiments are gauged by the state in which the accused appears and the moment he is seen to have neither title nor wealth to prove that he is honest, it becomes self-evident that he is not.

In vain did I try to defend myself and provide the court advocate I was briefly allowed to have with the best arguments: my master accused me, the diamond had been found in my chamber, and it was obvious that I had stolen it. When I attempted to raise the matter of Monsieur Du Harpin’s dishonest scheme and prove that the misfortune which had befallen me was no more than an effect of his revenge and his wish to be rid of a creature who, knowing his secret, had power to ruin his reputation, my counter-complaints were dismissed as mere recriminations. I was told that for forty years Monsieur Du Harpin had been known for an honest man and was quite incapable of such villainy, and I believed that I was about to pay with my life for my refusal to take part in a crime, when an unexpected turn of events intervened and I was freed

only to be thrust once more into the new calamities which still awaited me in this vale of tears.

A woman of 40 years called Dubois, notorious for abominable actions of every kind, was also on the point of having sentence of death carried out on her, her sentence at least being better deserved than mine since the case against her was fully attested, whereas it was impossible to find any crime that could be laid at my door. I had aroused the interest of this woman. One evening, only a few days before we were both to forfeit our lives, she told me that I should not go to bed but, doing nothing to attract attention, should stay by her side and keep as close to the gates of the prison as could be managed.

‘Between midnight and one o’clock,’ said the enterprising jade, ‘the building will catch fire. It will be my handiwork. It is possible that someone may well be burned to death, but no matter, for what is uppermost is that you and I shall escape. Three men, who are my accomplices and friends, will meet us and I shall answer for your freedom.’

The hand of Heaven which a short space before had punished innocence in my person now served crime in that of my protectress. The flames caught, the conflagration was horrible to see, ten people were burned to death, but we made off safely. That same day we reached a cottage in the forest of Bondy belonging to a poacher, a different kind of criminal from the others but a close associate of our gang.

‘Now you are free, my dear Sophie,’ Dubois said to me, ‘you are at liberty to choose whatever kind of life you please. But a word of counsel: give up your virtuous ways which as you can see have never helped you prosper. Misplaced delicacy brought you to the foot of the gallows while a gruesome crime enabled me to escape the rope: ask yourself what purpose goodness serves in the world and consider whether there is any profit to be gained by sacrificing yourself for it. You are young and pretty. I shall answer for making your fortune in Brussels, if you wish. I am bound there now, for I was born in that city. Within two years, I shall raise you to untold heights, but I warn you now that it is not along the narrow paths of virtue that I shall lead you to fortune. Anyone of your age who wants to get on quickly in life must be prepared to undertake more than one trade and be adept at managing more than one intrigue at a time. Do you hear me, Sophie, do you catch my drift? Make up your mind quickly. We must leave this place, for we shall be safe here for a few hours only.’

‘O Madame,’ said I to my benefactress, ‘I am deeply in your debt, for you saved my life. But I am also appalled that I should owe my life to a crime and you may be assured that if I had been given any choice in the matter, I would sooner have perished than set my hand to it. I am only too sensible of the dangers I have run by committing myself to those feelings of decency which will ever grow in my heart. But whatever the thorns of virtue, I shall always prefer them to the false beams that shine on prosperity, for these are dangerous marks of favour and the fleeting accompaniment of crime. I carry within me notions of religion which, thanks be to God, will never desert me. If Providence makes my course in life arduous, it is only so that I shall be the more amply rewarded in a better world. This hope is my consolation: it is balm to my sorrows and quiets my murmuring soul, it gives me strength in adversity and helps me to face whatever ills it is pleased to set in my path. It is a joy which would be soon extinguished in my heart were I to desecrate it with criminal actions and, being then filled with the fear of tribulations yet to come in this world, more terrible by far, I should also have in view the dreadful prospect of the punishments which heavenly justice reserves in the next for those who offend against it.’

‘Your principles are absurd and they will lead you straight to prison, my girl, take it from me,’ said Dubois with a frown. ‘Forget heavenly justice, your punishments and your rewards to come. Such talk is fit only for leaving in the schoolroom or, once you have left it and entered the world,

for enabling you to starve to death, should you be foolish enough to believe it. The callousness of the rich justifies the knavery of the poor, my child. If their purses would open to satisfy our needs and if humanity reigned in their hearts, then virtue would take root in ours. But as long as our distress, the patience with which we bear it, our honesty and our subjection serve merely to add weight to our chains, our misdemeanours are their handiwork and we should be dupes indeed to reject crime as a means of lightening a yoke which they fasten around our necks. We were all born equal in the eyes of Nature, Sophie. If fate chooses to disturb the original disposition of Nature's general laws, it is for us to correct departures therefrom and by our artfulness repair the deprivations of the strong. How I love hearing rich people, the judges, and the magistrates, oh, how I love seeing them preaching virtue at us! Oh, how difficult it must be for them to refrain from theft when they have three times as much as they need to live on, how difficult never to think of murder when they are surrounded only by admirers and submissive slaves, how exceedingly painful indeed to be temperate and sober when they are intoxicated by sensuality and the most succulent dishes are set before them—and they must find it trying indeed to be frank and honest when the need to lie scarcely ever arises. But the likes of us, Sophie, have been condemned to crawl on the earth, like the serpent upon its belly, by that same barbaric Providence which in your folly you have made your idol. We are looked on with scorn because we are poor, humiliated because we are weak, and in every part of the globe find nothing but gall and thorns—and yet you believe that we should deny ourselves the uses of Crime, though Crime alone opens the door to life which it sustains, preserves, and prevents from losing altogether. You would have us be eternally subject and humiliated while the class which dominates us has on its side the advantage of fortune's endless favours! You would wish upon us only toil, despair and suffering, poverty and tears, odium and the gallows! No, Sophie, no! Either the Providence which you revere was made only to deserve our contempt, or else its intentions were quite different. Learn to know Providence better, Sophie, acquaint yourself with its ways and be persuaded that if Providence places us in situations where acting wickedly becomes necessary and at the same time allows us to choose to be wicked, then its laws are served no less well by evil than by good and Providence thus gains as much by the one as by the other. The state into which we were born at her behest is a state of equality. Whoever disturbs that state is no more guilty than anyone who seeks to restore it, for both parties act upon impulses implanted in them, and have no choice but to act upon them, clap a blindfold to their eyes, and enjoy the result.'

I confess that if ever I wavered it was as I listened to the tempting arguments put by this artful woman. But in my heart a stronger voice than hers fought against her sophisms. I heard her out and then declared for the last time that I was resolved never to allow myself to succumb to corruption.

'In that case,' Dubois told me, 'do as you please. I leave you to your wretched fate. But if they ever hang you, as will surely happen given the fatality which saves crime and inevitably punishes virtue, at least remember to say nothing of us.'

While we had been discoursing thus, Dubois's three companions had been drinking with the poacher, and since wine commonly has the effect of making the criminal forget his old crimes and of prompting him to commit new ones while still teetering on the brink of the precipice from which he has just escaped, the villains were not content to observe my resolve to flee their clutches without wishing some entertainment at my expense. Their principles and customs, the gloomy place where we had halted, the degree of safety they believed they enjoyed, their drunkenness, my youth, innocence, and appearance—all served to encourage them. They left the table where they had been sitting, talked among themselves, and consulted Dubois. The mystery

of these proceedings made me tremble with horror. The final upshot was that before I departed I should have to make up my mind to pass through the hands of all four, either with good grace or by force; that if I accepted with good grace they would each give me one écu to see me to whichever destination I chose, since I refused to go with them; that if force was needed to make my mind up for me, the result would be the same; but that in order that their secret be not betrayed, the last of the four who had his way with me would plunge a dagger into my heart and then bury me at the foot of a tree. I leave you to imagine, Madame, the effect this execrable proposition made upon me. I flung myself at Dubois's feet and begged her to protect me a second time. But the jade merely laughed at a predicament which to me was appalling but which to her seemed a matter of small consequence.

'Mercy,' said she, 'what a pretty pickle! Here you are, required to oblige four lusty lads like these! There are ten thousand women in Paris, my girl, who would pay out good money to be in your shoes just now. Listen,' she said, however, after a moment's thought, 'I have enough influence over these clods to get you out of this—if you are prepared to earn it.'

'Alas, Madame! What must I do?' I cried through my tears. 'Say the word and I shall be ready!'

'You must come with us, become one of us, do exactly as we do and do it willingly. If you are prepared to pay this price, I guarantee the rest.'

I did not believe I had any choice. By accepting, I should be courting new perils, I own, but they were less pressing than those I faced at that moment. I might be able to avoid those which still lay in the future but there was nothing to preserve me from the danger now threatening me.

'I shall go anywhere, Madame,' I told Dubois, 'anywhere, I promise. Save me from these brutal men and I shall never leave you.'

'Lads,' said Dubois to the four bandits, 'the girl is now one of our gang. I have just admitted her as a full member. I order you not to do her any violence: she must not be sickened of the business on her very first day. You can see for yourselves how useful her youth and that pretty face are going to be to us. We must use her to further our interests and not sacrifice her to our pleasures. But the passions can have such power over man that no words can tame them. The men I now faced were in no mood to listen to reason. All four advanced towards me together in a state which was hardly calculated to allow me flattering hopes of being preserved, and with one voice declared to Dubois that even if there had been a gallows on the spot, I should still be their prey.'

'She's mine first,' said one of them, seizing me by the waist.

'Who says you can start?' said another, as he drove his comrade off and snatched me roughly from his grasp.

'By God, your turn's after mine,' said a third.

And the quarrel growing warm, all four champions grabbed each other by the hair and let fly with their fists, brawling amongst themselves and knocking each other to the ground. Meanwhile, only too happy with this turn of events which gave me time to make good my escape, and with Dubois being occupied in trying to separate them, I made a run for it, reached the forest, and the hut was soon lost from view.

'O Supreme Being!' said I, throwing myself on to my knees the instant I felt I was safe, 'Supreme Being who art my true protector and guide, take pity on my plight. Thou seest my weakness and my innocence, and knowest the trust with which I place all my hopes in Thee. Preserve me from the dangers which beset me, or by a death less ignominious than that which I have escaped, grant at least that I be recalled promptly to Thy eternal bosom.'

Prayer is the sweetest consolation of the unfortunate. He is stronger who has prayed. I stood up fortified by courage and, since it was now beginning to grow dark, I crept into a thicket where I could spend the night with the smallest risk of discovery. The sense of security I felt, my exhausted state, and the small measure of relief which I had lately tasted, all contributed to my passing a good night. The sun was already high when my eyes opened once more upon a new day. The moment of waking is the most critical time for the unfortunate: their senses are in repose, their minds are at peace, their misfortunes are temporarily forgotten— and all this reminds them of their misery with interest and makes the weight of their wretchedness even harder to bear.

‘Ah, it is true then,’ said I to myself, ‘there are indeed human beings who are intended by Nature to share the state of wild animals! I crouch in their lair and hide myself from men just as they do. What difference is there now between them and me? What was the point of being born to suffer so pitiable a fate?’ And my tears flowed liberally as I formulated these bleak reflections. I was scarcely done when I heard a sound nearby. For a moment I thought it was some beast of the forest but gradually I made out the voices of two men.

‘Come on, over here,’ said one, ‘it’s the ideal place for us. Here at least the spoiling presence of my interfering mother will not cheat me of a brief moment’s enjoyment of those pleasures which are sweetest of all to me.’

They drew near and halted so exactly opposite me that nothing of what they said, nothing of what they did escaped me and I saw .

‘Great Heavens, Madame,’ said Sophie, breaking off her tale, ‘can it be possible that fate has always placed me in such uniformly parlous situations for it to be as testing to ordinary decency to hear of them as it is for me to describe them? The horrible offence which outrages both Nature and established law, the heinous crime upon which the heavy hand of God has so often descended, I mean that infamy which was so new to me that I could scarcely conceive of it, was there, before my very eyes, consummated with all the impure refinements and dreadful proceedings which the most considered depravity could inject into it.’

One of the men, the dominant partner, was aged 24, wore a green coat and was sufficiently well turned out to suggest that he came of good family. The other appeared to be a young domestic in his service. He was 17 or 18 years old and very pretty. The spectacle was as lengthy as it was scandalous, and to me the time seemed to hang all the more cruelly since I dared not move for fear of giving myself away.

Finally, the felonious players who had enacted these criminal scenes, doubtless being sated, stood up and were about to rejoin the path which led them home when the master drew near to the bush which hid me to satisfy a need. My tall bonnet gave me away. He saw it.

‘Jasmine, dear boy,’ he called to his young Adonis, ‘we are betrayed. Our mysteries have been observed by the uninitiate, to wit, a girl. Come here and we shall winkle the hussy out and discover what the devil she is doing here.’

I did not put them to the trouble of helping me to leave my shelter. Dragging myself out, I collapsed at their feet.

‘O sirs!’ I cried, holding my arms out to them, ‘have mercy on an unfortunate creature whose fate is more to be pitied than you can think. Few have suffered calamities equal to mine. I beg you, do not allow the predicament in which you discovered me to start suspicions of me in your mind, for my situation is the result of misfortune and not of any wrongs that I have done. Do not increase the sum of the ills which lie heavy upon me, but on the contrary, I beseech you, kindly furnish me with some means of escaping the rigours by which I am pursued.’



Monsieur de Bressac (such was the name of the young man into whose clutches I had fallen) had a mind well stocked with licentiousness but a heart which was not over-generously endowed with compassion. It is regrettably only too commonly observed that sensual excess drives out pity in man. Its ordinary effect is to harden the heart. Whether this is because most carnal excesses require a kind of apathy of soul or whether the violent effect they produce on the nervous system weakens the sensitivity by which it operates, it nevertheless remains a fact that a professional libertine is rarely a compassionate man. But to the natural cruelty entrenched in the minds of the type of person whose character I have here described, there was further in Monsieur de Bressac's case an aversion so marked for our sex, a hatred so inveterate for everything which characterizes the human female, that I saw I should have the greatest difficulty in firing his soul with the sentiments through which I hoped to gain his sympathy.

'What are you doing here, my turtle-dove?' was the only answer, pretty harshly spoken, which I was given by this man whose heart I wished to soften. 'The truth now: you saw everything which passed between this young man and myself, did you not?'

'O no, sir!' I said quickly, believing that I should do no harm in disguising the truth on this particular score. 'I assure you, what I saw was quite unremarkable. I observed you both, this other gentleman and you, sitting on the grass, and I believe I noticed that you stayed there a while talking. That is all, I do assure you.'

'I'll take your word for it—for your sake,' answered Monsieur de Bressac. 'For if I thought for a moment that you had seen anything else you would not leave this thicket alive. Come, Jasmine. It is still early. We have time enough to listen to the tale of this whore's adventures. She can start telling us all about them now, and when she's finished we shall tie her to that grist oak there and try out our hunting-knives on her.'

The two young men sat down, ordered me to sit next to them and there, without art, I gave them a plain account of everything that had happened to me since the time of my birth.

'Come, Jasmine,' said Monsieur de Bressac getting up the instant I had done, 'for once in our lives, let us be just. All-seeing Themis has pronounced the slut guilty. We cannot stand by and see the goddess's designs frustrated, so we two shall proceed to carry out on a proven criminal the punishment which she was about to undergo. What we are about to do is no crime, my friend, but virtue. It will be a restoration of the moral order of things, and since there are times when we ourselves unfortunately upset that balance, we should have the courage to redress it whenever the occasion arises.'

And the two cruel men having pulled me to my feet began dragging me towards the appointed tree, as insensible to my moans as they were to my tears.

'Tie her to it this way on,' said Bressac to his valet as he pushed me face-forward against the tree.

They used their braces, handkerchiefs, anything that came to hand, and in a trice I was bound so cruelly tight that I found it impossible to move hand or foot. When this operation was completed, the blackguards removed my skirts, raised my petticoats above my head and took out their hunting-knives. I fully believed that they were about to hack and slash my hindquarters which in their ferocity they had bared completely.

'That will do,' said Bressac before I had felt a single thrust of his knife. 'That should be enough for her to know what we are like, to understand what we can do to her, and to ensure that she remains subservient to our will. Sophie,' he went on, releasing my bonds, 'get dressed, keep your counsel, and come with us. Serve me well and you will not have cause to regret it, my child. My mother needs a second waiting-maid. I shall present you to her. On the strength of what you

have told us of your adventures, I shall make myself answerable for your behaviour. But should you take advantage of my kindness or betray my trust ... Look closely at the oak which was to have been your hanging-tree. Never forget that it is not a league from the château where I shall now take you and that at the first offence, however trivial, you will be brought back here.'

Fully dressed once more and scarce able to find words to thank my benefactor, I threw myself at his feet. I kissed his knees and swore in every way I could think of that my conduct would be beyond reproach. But as untouched by my happiness as he had been by my distress, Monsieur de Bressac said:

'Let us be gone. Your conduct will speak for you and your conduct alone will decide your fate.'

We set off, Jasmine and his master conversing together and I meekly following in silence. Less than an hour's walk brought us to the chateau of the Countess de Bressac. Its magnificent appointments informed me that whatever position I was to have in this household, it would surely be better remunerated than that of head-housekeeper to Monsieur and Madame Du Harpin. I was shown into a servants' hall where Jasmine served me a very decent dinner. Meanwhile, Monsieur de Bressac went upstairs to see his mother, explained about me, and a half-hour later came to fetch me and presented me to her.

Madame de Bressac was a woman of 45, very beautiful still, who seemed to me highly respectable and, even more to the point, exceedingly considerate, though her words and principles were not unmixed with a certain asperity. She was two years the widow of a man of the highest rank who had brought her in marriage no fortune other than the noble name which he had conferred upon her. The expectations of the young Marquis de Bressac thus centred on his mother, for what his father had left him was barely adequate for his ordinary needs. Madame de Bressac swelled the sum by making him a generous allowance, but even so it was far from enough to meet her son's expenditure which was as large as it was irregular. The estate was worth at least 60,000 livres a year and Monsieur de Bressac had neither brothers nor sisters. He could never be prevailed upon to enter the army, for anything which took him away from his choicest pleasures was so unbearable to him that he refused categorically to submit to constraints of any sort. The Countess and her son spent three months of the year on their estate and the rest of the time in Paris, and those three months which she insisted that her son spend with her were torture to a man who could never absent himself from the centre of his pleasures without lapsing into despair.

The Marquis de Bressac commanded me to relate to his mother the same tale which I had already told him. When I had finished my story, Madame de Bressac said:

'Your candour and sincerity seem to me to put your innocence beyond doubt. I shall institute no enquiries about you beyond satisfying myself that you are, as you say, the daughter of the man you mentioned. If indeed you are, then I knew your father, a circumstance which will be an added reason for my interesting myself in your welfare. As for your difficulties with Du Harpin, I shall make it my business to settle matters with a couple of visits to the Chancellor who has been a friend of mine for many years. He is the most upright man in France. All that is required to overturn the charges against you so that you may return to Paris without fear is to prove your innocence to him. But you must bear in mind, Sophie, that what I promise you now is conditional upon irreproachable conduct on your part. In this way you can see that the pledges which I ask from you will not fail to turn to your advantage.'

I threw myself at Madame de Bressac's feet, assured her that she would never have reason but to be satisfied with me, and was immediately installed in the house as second chambermaid.

Within three days, the information requested from Paris by Madame de Bressac arrived and proved to be all I could have wished for. All my thoughts of misfortune faded at last from my mind, their place being taken by hopes of the sweetest consolations to which I now felt justified in looking forward. But it was not written by Heaven that poor Sophie would ever be happy, for should a few instants of peace chance to settle upon her, they would only serve to make her feel more bitterly still the moments of horror which would surely follow.

We were hardly arrived in Paris when Madame de Bressac began to busy herself on my behalf. The First President of the Court asked to see me. He listened with interest to my tale of woe, and Du Harpin's villainy, being investigated, was acknowledged. It was recognized that if I had taken advantage of the fire in the Palace prison, I had taken no part in causing it and I was assured that all proceedings against me were quashed by the magistrates appointed to examine the matter without their having need to resort to further formalities.

It may easily be imagined how closely such good offices bound me to Madame de Bressac: even had she not further shown me kindnesses of every description, how could the steps she had taken on my behalf have failed to endear me eternally to such a precious protectress? However, it did not enter into the intentions of the young Marquis de Bressac to have me draw so close to his mother. Independently of the appalling lewdness of the kind I have described to you into which the young man threw himself blindly and even more wildly in Paris than in the country, it was not long before I perceived that he hated the Countess with all his being. In truth, she did all she could to put an end to his debauches or at least to curb them, but she perhaps being over-harsh in her manner of proceeding, the Marquis, further inflamed by the effects of her strictness, plunged with renewed vigour into his excesses, and all the profit the poor Countess derived from her persecution of him was to be heartily detested.

'Do not imagine,' the Marquis would often tell me, 'that my mother acts unprompted in what she does for you. Believe me, Sophie, if I did not badger her at every turn she would probably forget what promises she gave to take care of you. She makes much of all the steps she takes, but they have all been my handiwork. I think I can fairly say therefore that if you feel grateful to anyone, it should be to me, and the return I ask of you will seem all the more disinterested in your eyes since you know enough of me to be quite certain that, however pretty your face, it is not your favours that I seek. No, Sophie, the services I expect from you are of a different order, and when you are quite convinced by all I have done for you, I trust you will find it in your heart to give me everything I am entitled to expect in return.'

Such words seemed so cloudy to me that I never knew what to answer. But answer I did, saying whatever came into my head and without giving sufficient thought to my replies.

The moment has come, Madame, when I must tell you of the only real wrong I ever did in my life for which I reproach myself. Wrong is perhaps not the word, more an unparalleled extravagance, but certainly not a crime. It was simply an error which rebounded against myself alone and which I do not believe was an instrument wielded by the equitable hand of Heaven to plunge me into the abyss which was secretly opening beneath my feet. I had been unable to see the Marquis de Bressac without feeling drawn to him by sentiments of tenderness which, try as I might, I could not overcome. Whatever thoughts I had about his aversion to women, the depravity of his tastes, and the moral distance which separated us, there was nothing on earth I could do to drench the flames of my dawning passion, and if the Marquis had asked me to lay down my life, I should gladly have sacrificed it for his sake and thought I had done little enough to oblige him. He had no inkling of my feelings which I kept very carefully locked in my heart, no inkling, the ungrateful wretch, of the cause of the tears shed daily by the unhappy Sophie for

the shameful excesses which were like to be his undoing. Yet he could not but be sensible of my eagerness to anticipate and undertake anything which might please him, nor was it possible that he could remain ignorant of my attentions which, in my blindness, extended to seconding his waywardness at least in so far as decency permitted, and to hiding them from his mother. My manner of proceeding had to some extent earned me his trust and, anything coming from him being precious to me, I so chose not to see how little his heart offered me that at times I was vain enough to believe that he was not indifferent towards me. But how promptly was I disabused by the extravagance of his carnal lusts! They were pitched at such a level that not only was the inside of the house staffed by servants, maintained on this execrable footing, whom I could not avoid, but also he kept a host of ne'er-do-wells outside too, he going sometimes to them and they calling on him every day. Since his tastes, odious though they are, rank with the most expensive, the Marquis made prodigious inroads into his fortune. Occasionally, I took the liberty to point out the disadvantages of his conduct. He would hear me out willingly enough and then say that no one had the power to correct the kind of vice which drove him; that it took countless different forms and had for each age of a man's life divers branches which, spawning ever new sensations with each decade that passed, were enough to see those unfortunate to worship at that particular shrine clear through to the grave. But if I tried to speak to him of his mother and the grief he caused her, all I obtained in return was resentment, ill temper, anger, impatience at seeing a fortune which should already be his remaining so long in her hands, the most inveterate hatred for a respectable mother, and the most brazen rebellion against the sentiments of Nature. Can it then truly follow in the case of a man who, indulging his tastes, has so categorically infringed the sacred laws of Nature that the necessary consequence of his first transgression is the appalling ease with which he goes on to commit all other crimes with impunity?

Sometimes I resorted to persuasion through religion in which I have almost invariably found consolation. I endeavoured to open the heart of this perverse man to its balm, being almost certain that I should hold him in a net of faith if I could succeed in communicating its charms to him. But the Marquis gave me little time to employ these means of persuading him. As a declared enemy of our sacred mysteries, a stubborn kicker against the purity of our doctrine, and a furious opponent of the existence of a Supreme Being, the Marquis, instead of allowing me to convert him, sought rather to corrupt me.

'All religions start from a false premiss, Sophie,' he would say. 'Each one assumes the need for belief in a Creator. Now if this everlasting world of ours, like all the others which hang in the infinite plains of space, had no beginning and can never have an end; if all the products of nature are the consequential effects of laws by which Nature herself is bound; if her perpetual actions and reactions presuppose the movement which is an integral part of her essence, then what role is left for the prime mover which you gratuitously impute to it? Believe me, Sophie, the God you admit to is nothing but the fruit on the one hand of ignorance and on the other of tyranny. When the strong first set out to enslave the weak, they convinced their victims that God sanctified the chains that bound them, and the weak, their wits crushed by poverty, believed what they were told. All religions are the destructive consequences of this first fiction and merit the same contempt as its source deserves. There is not one of these fairy-tales which does not march under the banner of imposture and stupidity. In all these mysteries which stagger human reason, I see only dogmas which outrage Nature and grotesque ceremonials which warrant nothing but derision. From the moment my eyes were opened, Sophie, I loathed all these disgusting shams. I vowed I should trample them beneath my feet and never return to the fold as long as I lived. If you wish to be a rational being, follow my lead.'

‘O sir,’ I answered the Marquis, ‘you will rob an unfortunate creature of her sweetest hope if you deprive her of the religion which consoles her. Firmly attached to what it teaches, fervently believing that all the kicks that come my way are no more than the effects of libertinism and the passions, shall I sacrifice the sweetest thoughts I know in life to sophisms which make me tremble?’

To this, I added countless other arguments dictated by my head and watered by my heart, but all the Marquis did was laugh, and his captious principles, enhanced by a more virile eloquence and backed by reference to books that I am glad to say I had never read, always got the better of mine. Madame de Bressac, a woman of virtue and piety, was not unaware that her son justified his wayward conduct by using all the paradoxes of the unbeliever. Oftentimes she communicated her grief to me and, being of a mind to think me possessed of a little more good sense than the other women who attended her, she took a fancy to confiding her sorrows to me.

However, she was increasingly exposed to her son’s evil ways. He reached the stage where he no longer hid them from her. Not only did he surround his mother with the dangerous rabble who served his pleasures but he went so far in his insolence as to tell her, within my hearing, that if she tried to interfere with his tastes once more, then he would convince her of their power to charm by demonstrations thereof in her presence. Such talk and his behaviour cut me to the quick, and I did all in my power to summon from deep within me reasons for stifling the wretched passion which consumed me. But is love a sickness which can be cured? Every argument I put up against it served only to stoke it higher, and the perfidious Bressac never seemed to me more alluring than when I had assembled in my mind all the reasons that should have led me to hate him.

I had been in that house for four years, still persecuted by the same sorrows, still solaced by the same sweet consolations, when the ghastly reason for the Marquis’s exploiting his seductive power over me was made plain in all its horror. At the time, we were in the country and I was the Countess’s sole attendant, her first chambermaid having obtained leave to remain in Paris on account of some business of her husband’s. One evening, shortly after quitting my mistress, I was taking the air on the balcony of my chamber, unable to make up my mind to go to bed, it being excessively warm, when the Marquis knocked unexpectedly on my door and begged me to give him leave to talk with me for part of the night. Alas, every moment granted me by the cruel architect of my unhappiness seemed so precious that I dared not pass up the chance of a single instant with him. He entered, closed the door carefully and, flinging himself on to a chair next to me, said in a slightly embarrassed way:

‘Listen, Sophie, I have something of the greatest consequence to tell you. Swear now that you will never reveal anything of what I am about to say.’

‘O sir, how can you think me capable of betraying your confidence?’

‘You have no idea what you would be risking if you ever showed me that I was mistaken in placing my trust in you.’

‘The greatest of my regrets would be to forfeit it. That is threat enough for me.’

‘Well then, Sophie, I am hatching a plot against my mother’s life and it is your hand that I have chosen to serve me.’

‘I, sir?’ I cried, recoiling in horror, ‘how could you ever have imagined two such horrible ideas? Take my life, sir, it is yours, I owe it to you. But you must never think that you will prevail upon me to be a party to a crime the very idea of which my heart could never countenance.’

‘Listen, Sophie,’ said Monsieur de Bressac, calmly quieting my agitation, ‘I suspected you

might be reluctant, but since you are a quick-witted girl, I flattered myself I could overcome your resistance by proving to your satisfaction that the crime which you think so monstrous is really a quite simple thing. To your unphilosophical eye, two crimes are involved: the destruction of a fellow human being and the circumstance that the deed is compounded by the fact that the death concerned is that of one's own mother. As far as the destruction of a fellow being is concerned, Sophie, you can be clear in your own mind that it is an illusion. The power to destroy life is not given to man who at most has the power to change its forms, but not the ability to obliterate it. Now, all forms are equal in the eyes of Nature. Nothing is lost in the immense melting-pot where endless variations are produced. Each quantity of matter thrown into it is continually renewed and given a new shape. Whatever part we play in the process cannot offend directly against the whole. Nothing we can do outrages Nature directly. Our acts of destruction give her new vigour and feed her energy, but none of our wreckings can weaken her power. So of what concern is it to Nature, endlessly creating, if a mound of flesh which today has the shape of a woman, should reproduce itself tomorrow as countless insects of different types? Have you courage enough to assert that it requires more effort on her part to construct an individual such as we are than to make a worm and that therefore Nature should logically take a greater interest in us? Or if her degree of concern, or rather unconcern, is the same in both cases, what can it matter to Nature if, through what we call the crime of one individual, another is changed into a fly or a lettuce? Even if it were proved to me that the human species is Nature's most sublime handiwork, and were I to be shown beyond doubt that humankind is so important to her that her laws are necessarily thrown into confusion by its being prematurely destroyed, then I might think that such destruction was a crime. But if the most careful study of Nature should prove to my satisfaction that everything which flourishes on this earth, even the least perfect of her works, is of equal importance in her eyes, I should never imagine that the transformation of one of these beings into a thousand others could ever infringe her laws. I should say to myself: all men, all plants, and all animals which grow, flourish and destroy each other in similar ways, never truly dying but simply reappearing as variants through the process which modifies them—all forms of life, I should further say, growing, destroying, reproducing themselves mechanically, taking now one form and now another, have the ability, if it pleases the Being who alone has the will and the power to actuate them, to change many, many times within the space of a single day without affecting a single law of Nature.

'But the being I propose to strike is my mother, she who bore me in her womb. But why should this footling consideration give me pause? On what grounds should it stay my hand? Was she thinking of me when lubricity drove her to conceive the foetus from which I grew? Should I be grateful to her for thinking of her pleasure? In any case, it is not the blood of the mother which shapes the child, but the blood of the father only. The female womb fructifies, preserves, and amplifies, but does not of itself contribute any vivifying ingredient. Since this is so, I could never have raised my hand against my father, whereas I view the idea of abbreviating my mother's life as a quite straightforward matter. If it is nevertheless possible for a child's heart to be justifiably moved by feelings of gratitude towards its mother, it can only be by reason of the manner in which she treated us from the time we were old enough to appreciate it. If she dealt with us kindly, we can love her, indeed perhaps we should. But if she showed us acts of unkindness linked to no law of Nature, then not only do we owe her nothing, but everything tells us we should be rid of her: it is a consequence of the egoism which naturally and irresistibly leads man to rid himself of everything which gives him pain.'

'O sir,' I replied in alarm to the Marquis, 'the indifference you impute to Nature is yet another

effect of your passions. Just for an instant, I beg you, heed your heart and ignore their clamour, and you will see that it reproves the arrogant reasoning prompted by your libertinism! Is not your heart, that judge before whom I ask you to stand, the temple where Nature, which you outrage, demands to be heard and obeyed? If Nature there inscribes the greatest horror for the crime you are planning, will you not concede that it is indeed reprehensible? If you answer that the heat of passion will destroy the horror of it in a twinkling, you will scarcely have time to take satisfaction from its being extinguished before it catches fire again, prompted by the imperious voice of Remorse. The more sensitive you are, the more agonizing its call will be. Each day, every moment, you will see before your eyes the tender mother whom your brutal hand dispatched to her grave. You will hear her plaintive voice still speaking the sweet name which was the delight of your childish years. She will appear in your waking nights, she will rack your dreams, she will reach out with bloody hands to reopen the wounds with which you savaged her. From that moment on, you would not know a single glimmer of happiness on earth, all your pleasures would be poisoned and all your ideas overcast. A heavenly hand whose power you underestimate will avenge the life you destroyed by turning yours to ashes and, without ever enjoying the fruits of your crimes, you will perish a victim of the mortal regret that you ever dared commit them!

My tears flowed freely as I pronounced these last words. I threw myself at the feet of the Marquis, implored him by whatever he held most dear to put out of his mind all thought of an infamous deed which I swore I would keep secret all my days. But I did not know the heart of the man I tried to disarm: it might beat strongly still, but crime had snapped its springs and the passions in all their fiery heat had melted all save evil-doing. The Marquis stood up coldly.

'I see clearly that I was mistaken, Sophie,' said he. 'I am perhaps as sorry for it for your sake as for mine. But no matter, I shall find other ways and you will have lost much in my eyes while your mistress will have gained nothing.'

This threat changed all my ideas. By not agreeing to the crime as put to me, I should place myself at considerable risk and my mistress would surely die; by consenting to be an accessory, I should be safe from my young master's anger and would necessarily save his mother. This thought, which with me was the work of a moment, prompted me to change sides at once. But since so sudden a shift might seem suspect, I made my defeat a lengthy business, forced the Marquis to repeat his sophisms many times, and gave the impression of not quite knowing how to answer them. The Marquis believed I was beaten, I justified my weakness by acknowledging his persuasive powers, made out at the last that I had capitulated, and the Marquis threw his arms about me. How happy his doing so would have made me had not his barbarous plans cast out all the feelings which my vulnerable heart had conceived for him. Had it been possible for me to love him still.

'You are the first woman I ever kissed,' the Marquis said to me, 'and in truth I do so now with all my heart. You are delicious, child. A ray of philosophy has lit up your mind. How is it possible that such a pretty face could have dwelt so long in darkness?'

And thereupon we agreed our plans. To ensure that the Marquis was firmly snared in the trap, I kept up a certain show of reluctance each time he outlined more of his scheme or explained by what means he intended to carry it off, and it was by this deception, which my unhappy plight fully justified, that I succeeded in fooling him completely. We arranged that some two or three days hence, depending on the opportunities which came my way, I should, without attracting attention, empty the small satchet of poison the Marquis gave me into the cup of chocolate which the Countess was in the habit of taking each morning. The Marquis answered for what would

happen next and promised me 2,000 écus annually for the rest of my life which would be mine to spend either in his entourage or in some other place which I should be free to choose. He signed this contract but without specifying in it what I was to do to earn his bounty and then we parted.

In the mean time, there occurred something too singular and too revealing of the character of the man with whom I had to deal for me not to pause at this point in my account, which you are doubtless anticipating, of the manner in which the cruel adventure I was embarked upon was concluded. Two days after our interview, the Marquis received news that an uncle, of whom he had entertained no expectations whatsoever, had died leaving him 80,000 livres a year. 'Sweet Heaven,' I asked myself when I was told the news, 'is it thus that celestial justice punishes those who plot treasons? I believed that by refusing to commit an infinitely smaller crime, I should forfeit my life. And now this man, for devising a scheme of appalling proportions, is set high upon a pinnacle!' But instantly repenting of this blasphemy against Providence, I fell to my knees, asked pardon of God, and took heart from the thought that this unexpected legacy would at least lead to a change in the Marquis's plans. Great God, how mistaken I was!

'O my dear Sophie,' Monsieur de Bressac said to me as he burst into my chamber that same evening, 'prosperity positively showers me with favours! How often have I told you that there is nothing better guaranteed to bring happiness than conceiving a crime—indeed, the road to happiness seems to be made easiest for the wrong-doer. Eighty plus sixty, child, makes 140,000 livres to spend annually on my pleasures.'

'But sir,' I replied, with a surprise modified by the circumstances by which I was bound fast, 'given this unexpected piece of good fortune, will you not now wait patiently for the death which you are intent on hastening?'

'Wait? I do not intend waiting two minutes, child. I am 28 now and waiting is hard at my age. I beg you, do not allow what has happened to alter our plans. Let us take satisfaction in finishing our business before the time comes for us to return to Paris. Try and see to it that the deed is done tomorrow or the next day at the latest. I am already looking forward to paying your first quarter's allowance and then of making over the full sum to you.'

I did my best to disguise the fear which such fervent pursuit of crime inspired in me. I resumed the role I had been playing, but all my feeling for him now being finally quenched, I believed that so hardened and villainous a man was deserving only of my horror.

But my position was extremely delicate. If I did not do what he wanted, the Marquis would soon realize that I had tricked him. If I warned Madame de Bressac, then whatever action she took as a result of my telling her, the young man would still know that he had been deceived and would perhaps resort to surer methods which would not only bring about the death of the mother but also leave me exposed to the vengeance of the son. There remained the law, but I was absolutely determined not to go down that road. I resolved therefore, come what may, to warn the Countess. Of all the avenues open to me, this seemed the best and I now stepped out boldly upon it.

'Madame,' I said to her the day after my latest interview with the Marquis, 'I have something of the greatest consequence to reveal to you. But though it affects you closely, I am determined to say nothing unless you first give me your word of honour that you will not give your son the smallest mark of your displeasure at what he has been rash enough to plan. You will act, Madame, you will do what you think best, but say nothing. You must grant what I ask or I shall remain silent.'

Madame de Bressac, thinking that the matter consisted of no more than new instances of her son's ordinary excesses, readily agreed to the promise I asked of her and I told her everything.



When that unhappy mother learned of such infamy, she burst into tears.

‘The wretch!’ she cried, ‘What did I ever do that was not for his good? If I tried to curb his vices or correct them, what motives could ever make me act with such severity but his happiness and tranquillity? To whom does he owe the fortune he has lately inherited if not to me and my efforts on his behalf? If I did not mention them to him, it was to spare his feelings. The monster! O Sophie, show me how black the scheme he has formed, paint every corner of the picture so that I have no room left to doubt, for I need to hear anything that will finally silence the voice of Nature in my heart.’

I then showed the Countess the sachet of poison which had been given into my keeping. We gave a little of it to a dog which we then shut up. It died two hours later in the throes of the most agonized convulsions. The Countess, doubting no longer and quickly determining upon the course she would follow, bade me hand over the rest of the poison and immediately dispatched a courier with a letter to her relative, the Duke de Sonzeval, asking him to call secretly on the Minister; to let him have the fullest account of the black-hearted villainy of which she was soon to be the victim; to obtain a *lettre de cachet* against her son; to proceed with all convenient speed to her estate with the letter and an officer of the law; and to deliver her without delay from the monster who plotted against her life. But it was written in Heaven that the abominable crime would be committed and that virtue brought low would succumb to the stratagems of the wicked.

The wretched dog upon which we had performed our experiment revealed all to the Marquis. He heard it howling and knowing his mother to be passing fond of it, anxiously asked what was the matter with the dog and where it was. Since those of whom he enquired knew nothing of the matter, they could not answer. It was doubtless at this point that he began to suspect. He said nothing, but I could see that he was worried, uneasy, and watchful all day long. I mentioned this to the Countess, but there was no choice: all we could do was to impress the courier with the need for haste while concealing the object of his mission. The Countess told her son that she was sending the man to Paris to request the Duke de Sonzeval to take personal charge of the affairs of the lately testate uncle, for unless an authorized signature appeared on the papers, there was every risk of lawsuits ensuing. She added that she had invited the Duke to come in person to lay the whole matter before her so that she could know whether or not, if the business required it, to go up to town taking her son with her. The Marquis, too skilled in physiognomy not to read the embarrassment on his mother’s face nor to mistake the hints of confusion in mine, took all this in but was now even more on his guard than before. Using the pretext of a walk with his *mignons*, he left the château and waited for the courier at a spot where he must surely pass. This messenger, who answered more willingly to him than to his mother, made no difficulties in handing over his dispatches and the Marquis, convinced of what he no doubt called my ‘treachery’, gave the man 100 louis, told him never to show his face at the house again, and returned with rage in his heart. But controlling himself as best he could, he met up with me, teased me in his usual manner, asked me if the deed was fixed for the morrow, added that it was vital it should be done before the Duke arrived, and went off to bed calmly enough and without a sign that anything was amiss. If the dreadful crime was committed—and the Marquis informed me soon afterwards that it was—it could only have happened in the manner which I shall now set down . . .

The next morning Madame took her chocolate according to her custom and, since no one had touched it but me, I am certain that nothing had been put into it. But at about ten o’clock the Marquis, entering the kitchen and finding there only the cook, commanded the man to go into the garden at once and pick peaches for him. The man protested, saying that he could not leave his

viands, but the Marquis insisted on his pressing fancy to eat peaches, saying he would stay and watch over the stove. The cook went, the Marquis inspected the viands destined for dinner and in all likelihood dropped the fatal drug which was to snap her life's thread into the chards of which Madame was passionately fond. Dinner was served, the Countess probably ate from the lethal dish, and the crime was perpetrated. What I have told you is conjecture only: during the unhappy aftermath of the event, Monsieur de Bressac told me that the deed was done, and my best guesses have yielded this as the only explanation of the manner in which he managed it. But let us leave these horrid speculations and turn now to the cruel way in which I was punished for having refused to have any hand in so dreadful a business and for having divulged it.

As soon as dinner was over, the Marquis came up to me:

'Listen, Sophie,' he said, with the outward coolness of a tranquil mind, 'I have hit upon a safer way of achieving my ends than the one I put to you, but it requires detailed work. I dare not appear in your chamber as frequently as I have of late, for I fear everyone's prying eyes. Be at the corner of the park at five o'clock. I shall collect you there and during a long walk I shall explain it all to you.'

Whether it was by the express leave of Providence or the fault of too much innocence or blindness on my part, I own there was nothing to forewarn me of the misfortune which lay in wait. I so believed the secret was safe and was so confident of the Countess's arrangements that I never imagined that the Marquis might have found them out. However, I confess to feeling a certain little awkwardness in my heart. One of our tragic poets has remarked that:

He perjures not but virtue furthers  
Who betrays a trust to punish murders.

And yet perjury must always be repellent to persons of a nice and feeling disposition who find that they are driven to stoop to it. My role went somewhat against the grain though my doubts did not last long. The Marquis's odious proceedings were to give me fresh cause for distress and my initial scruples were soon silenced.

He came up to me as gaily and as openly as could be and together we walked into the forest without his doing anything more than laughing and bantering as was his habit when he was with me. When I attempted to direct the conversation towards the matter about which he wished to speak to me, he told me to wait a little longer, saying that he feared that we were observed and that we were not yet in a safe place. Imperceptibly, we drew near to the thicket and the oak where he had first encountered me. I could not suppress a shudder on seeing the place, and at that moment the full extent of my imprudence and the true horror of my fate seemed to loom up before my eyes. You may judge if my fears multiplied when I saw, seated at the foot of the fatal tree where I had undergone so ghastly a trial, two of the Marquis's young *mignons* who were thought to be those he liked best. They stood up when we approached and into the grass let fall ropes, bludgeons, and other instruments which made me quake. Then the Marquis, addressing me now only with the crudest and foulest epithets, turned to me:

'You b—ch,' he said, while we were still out of earshot of his young men, 'do you recognize this thicket from which I dragged you like a beast of the forest and saved your life which you had richly deserved to lose? Do you recognize this tree to which I threatened to return you if you ever gave me cause to regret my generosity? Why did you agree to perform the actions against my mother I asked you to undertake if you were bent on betraying me? And what made you think you could serve virtue by putting at risk the life of a man to whom you owed your own? Placed

of necessity between two crimes, why did you choose the more abominable? You should have simply refused what I asked, not agreed to it the better to betray me.

Then the Marquis told me of the manner of his intercepting the courier's dispatches and of the suspicions which had led him to take such a step.

'What have you achieved by your duplicity, you lying b—ch?' he went on. 'You risked your life without saving my mother's, for that deed is done, and when I return to the house I expect to see my labours amply rewarded. But I must punish you, I must teach you to see that the path of virtue is not always the best and that there are times when to connive at a crime is preferable to exposing it. Knowing me as you must, how did you ever dare think you could play games with me? Did you imagine that the feeling of pity which my heart has never admitted except in so far as it furthers my pleasures, or perhaps one or two principles of religion which I have always trampled underfoot, would be enough to stay my hand? Or perhaps you were relying upon your beauty?' he added, in the most cruelly bantering tone. 'Ha! I shall now prove to you that your beauty, even when stripped of the last concealing veil, can never be more than the brand which kindles my vengeance!'

And without giving me time to reply, and showing not the slightest emotion on seeing the torrent of tears which flowed from me, he grasped my arm as in a vice and dragged me across to his henchmen.

'Here she is,' said he. 'This is the jade who set out to poison my mother and, in spite of my best efforts to stop her, has perhaps already succeeded in committing her foul crime. It might have been better if I had handed her over to the law, but then she would simply have forfeited her life whereas I prefer to let her live so that she may have more time to feel her sufferings. Strip her quickly and tie her with her face to that tree so that I may chastise her as she deserves.'

The order was no sooner given than executed. A handkerchief was thrust into my mouth, I was made to clasp the tree in a tight embrace and was bound at the shoulders and legs, which left the rest of my body free of ropes so that I should have no protection against the beating which I was about to receive. The Marquis, marvellously excited, seized a thong. Before striking me, he was cruel enough to wish to observe my face, and it was as though he was feasting his eyes not only on my tears but also on the expressions of pain and fear with which my countenance was suffused. He then placed himself behind me at a distance of about three feet and I immediately felt, from the middle of my back to the top of my legs, the stroke of the lash which he applied with all the strength he could muster. My tormentor paused for a moment and ran his hands roughly over the areas which he had just beaten black and blue. I did not catch what he said to one of his satellites but a handkerchief was immediately thrown over my head so that I was deprived of the power to see anything of their movements. However, I heard them moving about behind me before the resumption of the bloody scenes in which I was destined to play a further part. 'Oh yes, that's good,' the Marquis said before striking me anew. But hardly were these words, of which I understood nothing, out of his mouth when the beating began again with increased violence. There was another interval, hands again explored my lacerated flesh and there was more muttering. One of the young men said, 'Am I better this way?' and these new words, which made as little sense to me but to which the Marquis replied, 'Closer, closer', were followed by a third assault which was even more vigorously delivered than the others. While it lasted, Bressac said the following words two or three times in rapid succession, seasoning them with appalling curses: 'Go to it, both of you. Don't you understand? I intend her to die by my hand here and now?' These words, spoken in a graded crescendo of pitch and volume, brought the murderous onslaught to a close. For a few moments more, I caught the sound of whispering,

heard them moving around, and felt the ropes being untied. It was then that I saw my blood on the grass and realized the state I must be in. The Marquis was alone. His aides had disappeared.

‘Well now, whore,’ he said, looking at me with the distaste which comes when passion is spent, ‘don’t you think virtue is a rather expensive calling? Were not 2,000 écus a year a better bargain than a hundred strokes of the lash?’

I collapsed at the foot of the tree, almost fainting away. The unfeeling blackguard, still not sated by the horrors by which he had been transported and cruelly excited by the spectacle of my suffering, trampled me beneath his feet, pressing me into the earth as though he would choke me.

‘I am more than generous, for I have spared your life,’ he repeated twice or thrice. ‘You would be well advised to think seriously of the use to which you intend to put this new instance of my charity.’

Then he ordered me to my feet and told me to dress. Since there was blood everywhere, I dazedly gathered handfuls of grass and cleaned myself so that my clothes, which were the only ones I had, would not be stained with it. Meanwhile, he paced up and down, paying me no attention, concerned more with his thoughts than with me. My swollen flesh, the still flowing blood, the pain I was suffering—all made the business of dressing virtually impossible. But not once did the brutal man with whom I had to deal, the monster who had reduced me to this pitiful state and for whom, only days before, I should gladly have given my life, not once was he moved by the slightest feeling of commiseration to extend a helping hand. When I was ready, he came up to me.

‘Go where you will,’ said he. ‘You must have money left in your purse. I shall not take it from you. But have a care never to come anywhere near me again, either in Paris or here in the country. I warn you, word will go out that you murdered my mother. If she is not dead yet, I shall tell her it was you who did for her so that she may carry the thought with her to the grave. The entire household will be told. I shall inform the authorities to that effect. As a result, you will find Paris even more uninhabitable than before, for you should bear in mind that the previous case against you was never officially closed but, take note, simply adjourned. You were told that the matter had been dropped, but you were misled. Your sentence has neither been served nor cancelled and it was decided to let you carry on in this footing to see how you would behave. So now you face not one charge but two, and have as your adversary not a common money-lender but a rich and powerful man determined to follow you to hell if, by making slanderous complaints, you should abuse the life which I have been generous enough to let you keep.’

‘O sir,’ I answered, ‘though you have used me cruelly, you need fear nothing from me. I believed I had no choice but to act as I did when your mother’s life was at stake. But I shall never lift a finger against you if Sophie’s interests alone are uppermost. Goodbye, sir. May your crimes make you as happy as your cruelties have caused me pain. Whatever fate Heaven has in store for you, then as long as that same Heaven chooses to prolong my deplorable life, so long shall I use it solely to pray for you.’

The Marquis looked up and could not help but stare as I said these words. Seeing me bathed in tears and scarce able to stand, the heartless man, fearing no doubt to give way to his feelings, walked away and did not look back once in my direction. As soon as he had gone, I sank to the ground and there, surrendering to my distress, rent the air with my groans and watered the earth with my tears:

‘O God!’ I exclaimed, ‘Thou hast worked Thy purpose out. It was by Thy will that innocence has fallen prey to the guilty once more. Do with me, O Lord, as it pleaseth Thee, for the pain I have suffered is as nothing beside the pain Thou once didst bear for us! May the suffering which

I endure as I praise Thee render me worthy one day of the rewards which Thou hast promised the weak who keep Thee as a beacon in their time of trouble and glorify Thee in the midst of their travails!’

Night was falling. I was in no fit state to venture any further, indeed I was barely able to stand. I recollected the thicket where I had spent that night four years before, my situation being rather less wretched then than now, and dragged myself into it as best I could. Lodged in that same place, enduring agonies from my wounds which still bled, stricken by the grief of my thoughts and the sorrows of my heart, I spent the cruellest night that can be imagined. The resilience of my youth and my constitution both gave me a little strength as the new day dawned and, filled with dread by the proximity of that cruel chateau, I made off promptly, left the forest and, resolving to strike out at random for the first dwellings which I should meet with, entered the little town of Claye, some six leagues distant from Paris. I asked to be directed to the surgeon’s house and I was shown the way. I begged him to bind my wounds, saying that fleeing my mother’s house in Paris as the result of some affair of the heart, I had unfortunately fetched up in the forest of Bondy where wicked men had reduced me to the state he saw me in. He tended me, on the condition that I should swear out an affidavit to the Clerk of Justice in the village. I agreed. It seems that the matter was looked into though I never heard what came of it. The surgeon, agreeing to keep me in his house until such time as I should be well again, set about his business with such skill that within a month I was completely recovered.

As soon as my condition allowed me to take the air, my first thought was to find some village girl sufficiently shrewd and intelligent to be sent to the Chateau de Bressac to discover what had transpired since my departure. Curiosity was not my only motive in taking this step. Indeed, curiosity might have been dangerous and was certainly out of place. But I had left in my chamber there the little money I had earned while in the service of the Countess and I had barely 6 louis to hand, whereas I had 30 in the chateau. I did not imagine that the Marquis would be so cruel as to refuse me what was mine by right and was convinced that once his first anger had passed, he would not inflict a second injustice upon me. I wrote the most affecting letter I could. Alas, it was perhaps too affecting, for in it, despite my better judgement, my sorrowing heart spoke out in favour of that false-hearted man. I carefully hid the place of my confinement from him and entreated him to send me my effects and the small sum of my money which was in my chamber. A peasant girl aged between 20 and 25, brisk-mannered and with all her wits about her, promised to carry my letter and to make such discreet enquiries as would satisfy me on her return as to the various matters on which I informed her she would be questioned. I enjoined her expressly to withhold the name of the place whence she came, on no account to speak of me, but to say that she had got the letter from a man who had brought it from another town more than fifteen leagues distant. Jeannette set off (such was the name of my messenger) and four and twenty hours later brought me my answer. It is indispensable, Madame, for me to relate to you now what had happened in the residence of the Marquis de Bressac before I allow you to see the letter which I received from him.

The Countess de Bressac, falling gravely ill on the day I left the chateau, had died suddenly during that night. No one had arrived at the chateau from Paris and the Marquis, plunged into the deepest affliction (the hypocrite!), claimed that his mother had been poisoned by a chambermaid who had run off that same day and whose name was Sophie. A search was instituted for this maid, the intention being that if found she should be sent to the gallows. Besides this, the Marquis, now succeeding to his estate, had found himself far richer than he had thought, for Madame de Bressac’s strong-boxes and gems, of which little had been known, made him master,

independently of his own fortune, of 600,000 francs in property and ready cash. It was said that, sorely afflicted though he was, he had great difficulty in hiding his jubilation. The relatives who had been summoned for the post-mortem examination he had insisted on had duly lamented the fate of the unhappy Countess and sworn to avenge her if the maid who had committed so heinous a crime should ever fall into their hands. Then they left the young man in complete, undisturbed possession of the fruit of his villainy. Monsieur de Bressac himself had spoken to Jeannette and had asked her divers questions which the girl had answered with such firmness and candour that he had resolved to write a reply for her without pressing her further.

‘This is the fatal letter,’ said Sophie, taking it from her pocket. ‘I have it here, Madame. There are times when my heart has need of it and I shall keep it until my dying breath. Read it, if you can do so without revulsion.’

Taking the note from the hand of our fair adventurer, Madame de Lorsange read the following words:

‘A slut capable of poisoning my mother is bold indeed who dares write to me after committing so foul a mischief. She does well to conceal her whereabouts, for she may rest assured that if discovered she will be seriously incommoded. But what does she ask? Why does she speak of money and effects? Is not what she left behind the equivalent of what she stole during both her sojourn and her committing of her late crime? She is well advised never to send here again as she now does, for she should know that her messenger would be detained until the secret of her hiding-place was known to the authorities.’

‘Pray continue, my child,’ said Madame de Lorsange, returning the letter to Sophie. ‘These proceedings fill me with the deepest horror. To be rolling in wealth and to withhold from an unfortunate girl who refused to abet a crime the little money which she honestly came by, is an act of unprecedented infamy!’

‘Alas, Madame,’ continued Sophie, taking up the thread of her tale, ‘I was two days weeping over his cruel letter, bitterly lamenting the base dealing it revealed far more than the refusal which it contained. I am guilty, then, I cried, I am denounced to the law of men for having too earnestly respected Justice. So be it! But I do not repent of my conduct. Whatever befalls me, I shall always remain beyond the reach of spiritual torment and remorse as long as my heart remains pure and my wrongs run to nothing more than my having too well heeded those sentiments of even-handedness and virtue which will never desert me.’

Yet I could not believe that the searches the Marquis had spoken of had any substance to them. They seemed most unlikely for there would have been such danger to him of his bringing me before the Justices that I reasoned that he must secretly have been more frightened at the prospect of coming face to face with me, if he were ever to discover my hiding-place, than I was of his threats. This reflection determined my resolve to stay in the place where I then was and, if possible, to find employment there until my funds swelled sufficiently to enable me to leave. Monsieur Rodin (this was the name of the surgeon with whom I was lodged) himself suggested that I should enter his service. He was a man of 35 years of age, of a callous, abrupt, and brutal character, but nevertheless enjoying an excellent reputation throughout the whole of the surrounding country. He was totally wedded to his doctoring and as he employed no woman in his service, was only too pleased, on his returning home each day, to find one there to attend to the needs of his house and his person. He offered me 200 francs annually and a small share of the revenue from his practice, and I accepted what he proposed. Monsieur Rodin had too exact a knowledge of my person to be ignorant of the fact that I had never known a man. He was also aware of my extreme desire to keep myself always pure and promised he would never trouble me

on that score. As a result, our mutually agreeable arrangement was quickly settled. But I did not tell my new master everything and he never knew who I was.

I had been two years in his house, and though I did not fail to have a great deal of hard labour to do in it, yet the kind of peace of mind I enjoyed there had almost driven my sorrows from my mind, when Heaven, resolved never to allow one single virtue to go forth from my heart without immediately burdening me with misfortune, intervened once more to wrench me from the cheerless felicity I fleetingly tasted and plunge me into new calamities.

One day, finding myself alone in the house and passing through various parts of it as and where my duties beckoned, I thought I heard groans coming from the depths of a cellar. I approached, the sounds grew clearer, and I made out the cries of a girl. But a securely locked door separated her from me and I was quite unable to open up the place where she was held. Countless thoughts crowded into my mind. What was the poor creature doing there? Monsieur Rodin was childless and to my knowledge had neither sisters nor nieces in whom he might profess an interest. The perfect regularity of the life I had observed him lead ruled out the possibility that the young woman was intended for his debauches. For what reason, then, had he locked her away? Exceeding curious to resolve these difficulties, I dared question the child, asking her what she did there and who she was.

‘Alas, Mademoiselle,’ the hapless creature replied through her tears, ‘I am the daughter of a woodcutter who lives in the forest. I am but 12. The gentleman who lives here, aided by a friend, carried me off yesterday at a moment when my father was absent. Together they bound me, threw me into a bag of sawdust which prevented my crying out, put me over the back of a horse, and smuggled me into this house late last night, bringing me directly to this cellar. I do not know what they want of me but on reaching this place they stripped me naked, inspected my person, asked my age, and then the gentleman who seemed to be master of the house told the other that the operation would have to be postponed until the evening of the day after next on account of my being afraid; that the experiment would pass off all the better for my being a little calmer; and that otherwise I answered fully to the conditions required in a *subject*.’

After pronouncing these words, the girl fell silent and began weeping again more bitterly than before. I persuaded her to calm herself and promised to help. I found it exceedingly difficult to understand what Monsieur Rodin and his friend, also a surgeon, were intending to do with this hapless girl. However, the word *subject*, which I had heard them use on other occasions, immediately prompted the suspicion that it was more than likely that they were planning to perform some ghastly anatomical dissection on the wretched child. But before fixing myself in this cruel opinion, I resolved to make further enquiries. Rodin returned with his friend and they supped together and dismissed me. With a show of obedience, I hid myself, and their conversation convinced me only too well that they were indeed hatching a horrible plan.

‘It is a part of the anatomy,’ said one, ‘which will never be properly understood until it has been examined with the greatest exactness in a subject aged 12 or 13 who is cut open at the precise moment pain makes contact with the nerves. It is odious that considerations of a piddling sort should impede the progress of science the way they do. She would be one subject sacrificed to save millions: can we afford to wonder whether we should pay such a price? Is the murder which is sanctioned by law of a different nature to the kind which we are about to commit in our operation? Is not the whole point of the wise laws which permit capital punishment that one life should be sacrificed to save a thousand others? So let no such reservations stand in our way.

‘As far as I am concerned,’ the other went on, ‘I am clear in my own mind. I should have done it long ago if I had dared to do it alone.’

I shall not report to you the rest of this conversation. It ran solely upon medical matters and I took in little of it. But from that moment I set the whole of my mind, whatever the cost might be, to the task of rescuing this wretched victim from an art which, though precious no doubt from every point of view, bought its progress at too high a price when that price was the immolation of innocence. The two friends parted and Rodin went to bed without speaking a word to me. The following day, which was the day appointed for the sacrifice, he left the house in the usual way, saying that he would not return till supper which he would, as on the previous evening, take with his friend. He was hardly out of the house when I began busying myself with my own scheme. Heaven gave its blessing, but whether this was to succour innocence sacrificed or with a view to punish wretched Sophie for her act of compassion, I dare not say. I shall relate the matter as it happened, and you will be the judge, Madame, for I am brought so low by the hand of impenetrable Providence that I cannot ever fathom what it has in store for me. Endeavouring always to promote its designs, I have been barbarously punished for doing so and can say no more than that.

I went down to the cellar and again questioned the girl who repeated the same talk and the same fears. I asked her if she knew where her captors left the key when they closed her prison door on her. 'I don't know,' she answered, 'but I believe they take it with them.' Determined to leave no avenue unexplored, I was casting around me when I felt something in the dirt at my feet. I bent down. It was the key! I opened the door. The poor little creature threw herself at my feet and watered my hands with the tears of her gratitude. Without pausing to wonder what risk I ran, without reflecting on the fate which must await me, I thought of nothing but of ways of helping the child to escape. I succeeded in getting her out of the village without our meeting anyone and set her down on the forest path, kissed her, and rejoiced as much as she both in her present happiness and in the good cheer she would bring to her father when she reappeared before him. Then I promptly returned to the house.

Our two surgeons returned at the hour appointed in eager anticipation of executing their odious plans. They supped with as much good humour as haste and went down into the cellar the moment they had finished. The only precaution I had taken to conceal what I had done was to break the lock and return the key to the place where I had found it, so as to suggest that the girl had escaped unaided. But the men I hoped thus to deceive were not the kind to let themselves be so easily duped. Rodin came back up fuming, leaped upon me and, in a welter of blows, demanded to know what I had done with the girl he had locked up. I began by denying all knowledge of it, but my wretched honesty led me in the end to admit everything. There is nothing that can match the callous, wild rantings which these two blackguards then uttered. One proposed that I should take the place of the child I had saved, the other that I should be subjected to tortures even more appalling. All these proposals and ravings were interspersed with blows which sent me reeling from the one to the other and soon I was so dazed that I fell to the ground unconscious. Their fury was then quieted. Rodin brought me round and as soon as I had recovered my wits, they ordered me to strip. I obeyed tremblingly. When I was as they wanted, one of them held me while the other operated: they cut a toe from each of my feet then, sitting me down, they pulled out one of my back teeth apiece.

'But that's not the finish of it,' said Rodin, putting an iron into the fire. 'She came to me with the stripes of the whip on her. I intend to send her away otherwise marked.'

And so saying, the unspeakable wretch applied to the back of my shoulder the red-hot iron with which thieves are branded while his colleague held me fast.

'Now let the whore try and make trouble, just let her try,' said Rodin furiously and, pointing to



the shameful brand, added: 'I shall have no trouble now explaining my reasons for dismissing her from my service with such secrecy and such dispatch.'

This said, the two friends laid hold of me. It was night. They took me to the edge of the forest and callously left me there, but not without a reminder of how dangerous it would be for me in my present disreputable state to lodge any kind of complaint against them.

Anyone else but I would have paid little heed to this threat: the moment it was shown that the treatment I had received was not the work of any established court of law, what had I to fear? But my weakness, my ingrained lack of guile, the alarms which arose out of my unfortunate adventures in Paris and at the Chateau de Bressac, all these things numbed my wits and made me fearful and I had now only one thought, which was to flee from that dreadful place as soon as my sufferings had eased a little. Since they had carefully bound the hurts they had inflicted on me, the pain had subsided by the next morning and, after spending one of the most dreadful nights of my life under a tree, I set off at first light. The injuries to my feet prevented my walking very quickly but, anxious to be well clear of the forest which was so full of danger for me, I nevertheless made four leagues that first day and as many again the next and the day following. But having no directions and not daring to enquire my way, I simply went in circles around Paris, and by the evening of the fourth day of my perambulation, I found I had got no further than Lieusaint. Knowing that this road would carry me to the cities of southern France, I resolved to follow it and make my way as best I could to those distant places, believing that the peace and safe haven which were so cruelly denied me in my native land stood waiting for me perhaps at the other end of the globe.

O fatal error! O, how numerous the trials I had yet to endure! My funds, swelling more modestly in my service with Rodin than during the time I had spent with the Marquis de Bressac, were not so large that I had needed to set a proportion aside for safe-keeping, and fortunately I had the entire sum with me, which is to say about 10 louis, this sum being made up of what I had salvaged from my Bressac service and what I had earned in the house of the surgeon. Although excessively weighed down by my sorrows, I could yet rejoice that this money had not been taken from me and I flattered myself that it would at least last me until I was able to find a situation. As the infamies which had been inflicted upon me did not show outside my clothes, I fancied I should always be able to hide them and their stigma would not be a bar to my earning a living. I was 22 and enjoyed rude good health in spite of my being slight in build and slenderly made; I was possessed of a face which, to my cost, others praised too well, and a handful of virtues which, though they had never borne me but misfortune, nevertheless afforded me inward consolations and allowed me to hope that in the end Providence would grant them if not some measure of reward then at least some suspension of the ills which they had brought upon my head. Taking heart and full of hope, I continued on my way as far as Sens. But my badly healed feet caused me considerable pain and I resolved to rest up there for a few days. Not daring to expose the cause of my sufferings to any person and recalling the drugs which I had seen Rodin employ in similar cases, I bought quantities of the same and treated myself. A week's rest set me completely to rights. I might perhaps have found myself employment at Sens, but only too sensible of the need to get away I did not even think to ask. I went on my way with an idea that I might seek my fortune in the Dauphiné region. I had heard a great deal about this part of France during my childhood and fancied happiness was to be had there. We shall see if I succeeded in finding it.

Whatever the circumstances of my life, the feeling for religion had never deserted me. Scorning the sophisms of clever men which I believed to stem much more from libertinism than

from true conviction, I always countered them with my heart and my conscience, finding in both sufficient weapons to combat them. Forced on occasions by my misfortunes to neglect the duties of religion, I made good my deficiencies whenever I could. I had just left Auxerre on 7 June—I shall never forget that time—and had proceeded for about two leagues. The heat was beginning to tell on me and I resolved to climb a low hill topped by a spinney to my left which was somewhat out of my way, with a notion of finding a little coolness and of sleeping a couple of hours there, which I could do at a cheaper cost than at an inn and in greater safety than on the high road. I made my way up and settled at the foot of an oak where, after partaking of a frugal meal of a crust of bread and water, I surrendered to the charms of Morpheus. I slumbered peacefully for above two hours. On waking, I feasted my eyes on the landscape spread out before me, still to the left of the road. In the middle of a forest which stretched away endlessly, I could make out, more than three leagues off, a small steeple rising modestly into the air.

‘Sweet solitude!’ said I, ‘how dearly I long to dwell in thy midst! Here must be the retreat of solitary nuns or saintly men, with thoughts only for their duties, wholly devoted to religion, far removed from pernicious society where crime, ceaselessly doing battle with innocence, invariably gains the upper hand. I feel sure that all the virtues reside behind those walls.’

I was musing thus when a young woman of my age, shepherding a few sheep on this higher ground, suddenly came into view. I enquired of her what the buildings were and she said that what I could see was a house of Recollet Friars which was occupied by four solitary Brethren whose religion, abstinence, and sobriety were without equal.

‘It is,’ said she, ‘a place of pilgrimage where once a year people go to see a miraculous Virgin who grants the truly pious whatever they ask.’

Filled with an immediate desire to go and solicit help at the feet of the Holy Mother of God, I asked the girl if she would come with me. She said that she could not, that her mother was waiting even then for her at home, but that the way was easy. She pointed it out to me, adding that the Father Superior, who was the most respectable and holy of men, would not only receive me warmly but extend a helping hand should I be in need of one.

‘He is called the Reverend Father Raphael,’ the girl went on. ‘He is Italian but has lived all his life in France. He is happy in this solitary place and has several times refused excellent offers of advancement from the Pope to whom he is related. He is a man of high family, mild-mannered, obliging, full of zeal and piety, aged about 50, and considered by everyone hereabouts to be a saint.’

The words of the shepherdess inflaming me further, I found it quite impossible now to ignore the desire I had formed to undertake a pilgrimage to the monastery and, by as many pious acts as I was capable of, to make amends for all the neglected observance of which I was guilty. Although I myself stood in need of alms, I gave the girl of my charity and without more ado was embarked upon the road to Sainte-Marie-des-Bois (this was the name of the monastery towards which I was headed). Down on the plain once more, I lost sight of the steeple and my only guide was now the forest itself. I had not asked my informant how many leagues it was from the place where I had encountered her to the monastery, and soon I discovered that the distance was in fact much greater than the idea I had formed of it. But I was in no whit discouraged. I reached the edge of the forest and, observing that there was ample daylight left, I decided to press on into it, being virtually assured of getting to the monastery before nightfall. However, my eyes met with no sign of human activity, not a house even, and the only way forward was a little-used path which I followed as best I could. I had come at least five leagues from the hill where I had thought that three at most would see me to my destination, and could still make out nothing of it.

The sun was about to desert me when at last I heard the sound of a bell less than a league from where I was. I turned towards the sound, I quickened my steps, the path widened a little, and after an hour's walking from the time I heard the bell, I finally made out some hedges and shortly after that the monastery itself. Nothing could be more rural than this deserted spot. There were no other buildings close by, the nearest being more than six leagues off, and in every direction the forest extended for at least three leagues. The monastery being in a hollow, I had been obliged to make a considerable descent to get to it: this explained why I had lost sight of the steeple the moment I was down on the plain. The hut occupied by one of the Brothers who tended the garden was built against the wall of the inner refuge, and it was here that the traveller applied before gaining entry. I asked the saintly hermit if it was allowed to speak to the Father Superior. He asked me what I wanted of him. I gave him to understand that a matter of religious observance, a vow, had drawn me to this pious retreat and that I should be thoroughly consoled for all the trouble I had taken to reach the place if I could, just for a moment, prostrate myself before the Virgin and kneel at the feet of the holy director of the house where her miraculous statue resided. After showing me where I could rest, the Brother disappeared into the monastery and, since it was already night and the friars were, said he, at supper, it was some time before he returned. Finally, he reappeared accompanied by a friar:

'This is Father Clement, Mademoiselle,' said the Brother. 'He is the steward of our House and he has come to determine whether what you desire is sufficiently grave to warrant disturbing the Superior.'

Father Clement was a man of 45, enormously stout and colossally tall. His eyes were wild and dark, his voice rough and hard, and his manner made me tremble far more than it consoled. An involuntary shudder seized me and, powerless to prevent it, the recollection of all my past misfortunes swam up into my memory.

'What do you want?' the friar said very sternly. 'What time is this to be coming to church? You have the look of an adventuress about you.'

'Holy Man,' said I, flinging myself to the ground, 'I thought there was never a wrong time to appear in the house of God, and to enter it I have travelled far, full of fervour and devotion. I ask to be confessed if that is possible, and when the secrets of my heart are known to you, you will see whether or not I am worthy to prostrate myself at the feet of the miraculous Virgin which you care for in your saintly house.'

'But it is not the hour for confession,' said the friar in a kindlier tone. 'Where will you spend the night? We have nowhere to accommodate you. Morning was the time to come.'

Against this I set out for him all the reasons which had prevented my doing so and, without giving me any further answer, he went off to report to the Superior. A few moments later, I heard the church doors opening and then saw the Father Superior himself, striding towards the gardener's hut where I was. He invited me to go with him into the temple. Father Raphael, of whom I should give you some idea before proceeding further, was as old as I had been given to believe but looked a man of not above 40 years. He was slim, quite tall, and his face was intelligent and kindly. He spoke French extremely well though with a slight Italian accent, and was as outwardly genteel and considerate as he was inwardly saturnine and fierce, of which I shall presently have only too much occasion to persuade you.

'My child,' this man of God said graciously, 'for all that the hour is quite unseemly and although it is not our custom to welcome callers so late, I shall nevertheless hear your confession. We shall then consider what arrangements can be made for you to spend the night with respect to the decencies until tomorrow when you will bow down to the holy statue which

we have in our care.'

So saying, he lit a number of Lamps around the confessional, bade me go inside and, sending the Brother away and shutting all the doors, urged me to confide fully and freely in him. In the presence of so kindly-seeming a man, I felt perfectly recovered from the fears which Father Clement had started in me. After humbling myself at my confessor's feet, I opened my heart fully to him and, with my habitual candour and trust, left him in ignorance of nothing which concerned me. I confessed all my faults and confided all my misfortunes ever to him: nothing was omitted, not even the shameful mark with which the execrable Rodin had branded me.

Father Raphael listened with the closest attention, and even asked me to repeat a number of details which he heard with an air of compassion and concern. His chief questions at various times concerned the following points:

1. Was it quite true that I was an orphan and hailed from Paris?
2. Was it really the case that I had no family or friends or protectors or anyone with whom I corresponded?
3. Had I told anyone other than the shepherdess of my design to come to the monastery, and had I arranged to meet her on my return?
4. Was it a fact that I was a virgin and that I was but 22 years of age?
5. Was it absolutely certain that I had not been followed and that no one had observed my entering the monastery?

When I had given him full satisfaction on these matters and answered each question in the most candid fashion, the Superior rose to his feet and, taking me by the hand, said:

'Come, my child. The hour is too late for you to kneel to the Virgin this evening. But I shall see to it that tomorrow you will have the sweet comfort of hearing mass at the foot of her statue. But first let us think of how we shall arrange for you to sup and sleep tonight.'

And so saying, he led me towards the sacristy.

'But Father,' said I with a hint of unease which I felt was beyond my control, 'am I then to be lodged inside your house?'

'But where else, fair pilgrim?' he replied, opening the doors of the cloister which, giving on to the sacristy, gave me entry to the main body of the building. 'Come now! Are you afraid to spend the night with four men of God? Oh, you will discover, my angel, that we are not really as sanctimonious as we appear and that we know how to take our pleasure with a pretty girl.'

These words made me quake. 'O, just Heaven!' said I to myself. 'Am I once more to be the victim of my righteous sentiments? Will the desire which I felt to draw near to what is most respectable in religion meet with the same punishment as a crime?' Meanwhile we continued to advance through the darkness until at last, at the end of one of the sides of the cloister, there appeared a stairway. The Superior indicated that I should precede him and, observing that I was somewhat reluctant to do so, turned to me:

'Twice a whore!' he said angrily and, immediately exchanging his smooth tone for the most sneering of manners, went on: 'Don't think you can turn back now! God's blood, you will soon learn that you had done better to tumble into a robbers' lair than fall into a company of four Recollets!'

Causes for my fears increased and multiplied so rapidly before my very eyes that I had no time to be alarmed by these words which had no sooner registered when new subjects of alarm assailed my senses. The door opened and seated at a table I saw three friars and three girls, all six

in the most indecent state imaginable. Two of the girls were completely naked and the third was in the process of being undressed. The friars were more or less in the same condition.

‘My friends,’ said Raphael as he entered the room, ‘we were one short: now we have her! Allow me to present to you a genuine phenomenon. Here is a Lucretia who bears on her shoulder the mark of the whore and here,’ he went on with a gesture as clear as it was indecent, ‘here, proof certain of an authentic virginity.’

Great hoots of laughter from every corner of the room greeted this singular welcoming address and Clement, the friar I had met first, already half drunk, immediately shouted for the facts to be checked at once. Given the obligation on me to paint a picture for you of the people in whose midst I now found myself, I shall interrupt my tale here—but shall leave you in suspense with regard to my situation for the shortest time possible.

You are already sufficiently acquainted with Raphael and Clement for me to come directly to the others. Antonin, the third of the friars in the monastery, was a small man of 40, spare, slight, with a temperament of fire and the face of a satyr, hairy as a bear, a man of unbridled lechery, mettlesome and nasty beyond example. Father Jerome, the senior man, was an old libertine of 60, as hard and as brutal as Clement but the greater drunkard of the two. Being indifferent to ordinary pleasures, he was obliged, if he was to feel any glimmer of sensuality, to have recourse to tastes as depraved as they were revolting.

Florette was the youngest of the women. She was a native of Dijon, aged about 14, the daughter of a prosperous merchant of that town. She had been abducted by agents of Raphael who, wealthy and enjoying great credit in his Order, was prepared to spare no pains in the pursuit of his pleasures. She was dark, had very pretty eyes and an exceedingly alluring and provocative face. Cornélie was about 16, blonde and comely in appearance. She had beautiful hair, dazzling skin, and the finest of figures; she was from Auxerre, the daughter of a wine-merchant, and had been seduced by Raphael himself who had covertly lured her into his snares. Omphale was a woman of 30, very tall, with a very sweet and pleasing face, an extremely full figure, superb hair, the most handsome bosom conceivable, and the tenderest eyes you could ever hope to see. She was the daughter of a well-to-do vine-grower from Joigny and had been on the point of marrying a man who would have made her fortune when Jerome detached her from her family at the age of 16 by decoying her with the most extraordinary enticements. Such was the company in which I was to live, such the sink of foulness and filth, whereas I had fancied I would find virtues there frilly consonant with all that may be assumed of a respectable place of retreat.

The moment I joined this fearsome group, I was given to understand that I should be well advised to imitate the submissiveness of my companions.

‘You can easily imagine,’ said Raphael, ‘how futile it would be to put up any resistance in this inaccessible fastness to which your unlucky star has brought you. You say you have endured many misfortunes and, judging by your tale, that is quite true. Yet you will note that the greatest mishap of all for a virtuous maid is still missing from the catalogue of your misfortunes. Is it natural for a girl to be a virgin at your age? And is not being so a kind of miracle which could not be prolonged indefinitely? Like you, your companions were extremely put out when they realized they had no choice but to serve our desires and, as you will wisely do, they submitted at the last when they saw that failure to do so would lead only to harsh treatment. In your present circumstances, Sophie, how can you possibly hope to defend yourself? Give a thought to how alone you are in the world. On your own admission you have neither relatives nor friends remaining. Think of your situation here in this sequestered place far from help, forgotten by the outside world, in the clutches of four libertines who certainly have no wish to spare you. To

whom will you turn ? Will it be to the God whose help you implored with such fervour only moments since, who takes advantage of your zeal to push you a little more firmly into the trap? You must see that there is no power human or divine capable of plucking you from our grasp, nothing in the realm of physical possibilities or in the class of miracles, nothing in short which can succeed in further preserving the virtue of which you are so proud, nothing which will prevent your becoming in every sense and in all conceivable ways the prey of the foul excesses which all four of us are about to indulge in at your expense. So remove your clothes, Sophie, and may your most total resignation earn our leniency which, however, if you do not submit, will be instantly replaced by the harshest treatment which will, in turn, serve only to inflame us further without shielding you from our intemperance and brutal appetites.'

I was only too aware that this terrible haranguing left me without expedient. But would I not have been indeed guilty not to resort to the shift which my heart now prompted me to take and which Nature still left open to me? I threw myself at Raphael's feet and, deploying all the forces of my moral being, implored him not to take advantage of my predicament. The bitterest of salty drops bedewed his knees and everything my heart could furnish by way of pathos I dared try upon him as I wept—but having yet to learn that tears are but an added attraction in the eyes of crime and debauchery, I did not know that everything I did in my efforts to move the hearts of these monsters would simply have the effect of inflaming them further. Raphael got to his feet in a fury:

'Take the slut, Antonin,' he said, frowning ominously, 'and as you strip her and we look on, teach her that compassion has no claim upon men like us.'

Antonin seized me in his spare, wiry arms and, spicing word and action with appalling oaths, took less than two minutes to throw off my clothes and expose my nakedness to the gaze of the assembled company.

'Such a beautiful creature!' said Jerome. 'May the monastery walls fall on me if I ever saw such loveliness these thirty years past!'

'One moment,' said the Superior, 'let us put a little order into our dealings. You are all aware, my friends, of our customary procedures with new acquisitions. She must undergo them all, without exception, and meanwhile let these three other women remain at hand to attend to or stimulate our needs.'

Immediately, a circle was formed and I was placed in the centre. There, for above two hours, I was inspected, scrutinized, probed by all four libertines, the object in turn of their praise and censure. You will permit me, Madame (said the beautiful prisoner blushing furiously at this juncture), to draw a veil over a part of the obscene details which were observed at this first ceremony. Let your imagination picture every outrage to which the spirit of debauchery is like to incite lecherous men to perform in such circumstances. Let it observe them as they pass in turn from my companions to me, comparing, contrasting, juxtaposing, discoursing—and you will have only the palest notion of what was perpetrated during the course of those first orgies which, however, were tepid affairs compared with the horrors of which I was shortly to be the victim.

'Come,' said Raphael whose desires had reached a prodigious pitch of excitement which he seemed incapable of containing any longer, 'the time has come to sacrifice the victim. Let each of us prepare to make her undergo our chosen pleasures.'

And the wicked man, placing me on a couch in an attitude propitious to his execrable pleasures and ordering Antonin and Clement to hold me fast, this Raphael, who was Italian, a friar and thoroughly depraved, satisfied his impure desires but left me still a maid. Was there ever such frenzy? It was as though each of these crapubus men gloried in denying Nature in the choice of

their ignoble pleasures. Clement stepped forward, excited by the sight of the infamies committed by Raphael, and made more furious still by what he had been engaged in as he watched. He declared that he would be no more dangerous to me than his Superior and that the altar on which he paid his homage would similarly leave my virtue unthreatened. He ordered me to kneel and, clasping me close as I crouched, assuaged his perfidious passions in such a way that during the sacrifice I was denied the power of protesting at the irregularity of his procedure. Jerome followed, choosing the temple favoured by Raphael, but without attempting to reach the sanctuary; content to observe the portals from without and excited by preliminary, quite indescribable obscenities, he achieved the full satisfaction of his desires only by employing the same barbarous means of which Dubourg almost made me the victim and which I suffered entire at the hands of Bressac.

‘The preparations have begun well,’ said Antonin as he seized me. ‘Come, my sweet, come that I may make up for the irregularity of my brothers and pick the flower which their intemperance has left for me . . .’

The details . . . O God! . . . I cannot find words to paint them. It was as if the villain, the most libertine of the four, though seemingly the least removed from the views of Nature, was prepared to tread her path and put a smaller degree of nonconformity into his order of worship, only by compensating for a semblance of lesser depravity by inflicting the highest degree of outrage upon my person . . . Alas, if in imagination I had on occasion strayed to thoughts of such pleasures, I always believed them to be as chaste as the God who inspired them: they were given to humankind by Nature as a consolation and were born of love and decency. Foreign to me was the notion that man, like the beasts of the field, could pleasure himself only by making his partners suffer. But this I now discovered, and with such a degree of violence that the natural pain of the loss of my virginity was the least of the agonies which I was required to bear during his terrifying onslaught. But Antonin marked the moment of paroxysm with such furious whoopings and bellowings, with such murderous assaults on every part of my body, and not least with bites which were like the tiger’s bloody caress, that for a moment I believed I had fallen prey to some wild animal which would not be sated until it had devoured me whole. When these horrors ended, I collapsed upon the altar where I had been sacrificed, motionless and almost unconscious.

Raphael ordered the women to care for me and give me food, but a fit of rage and sorrow mixed assailed my soul at this cruel moment. I could not bear the horrible idea that I had now at last lost the treasure of my maidenhood for which I would have sacrificed my life a hundred times over, nor the thought that I had been defiled by the very men from whom I had every reason on the contrary to expect to receive most help and the highest spiritual consolation. My tears flowed freely, my screams reverberated around the room, I rolled upon the ground, tore my hair and begged my tormentors to make an end of me. But though the blackguards, far too hardened to such displays, busied themselves more with tasting new pleasures with my companions than with easing my sufferings or comforting my hurts, yet nevertheless being inconvenienced by my wailing, they resolved to send me away to rest in a place where I could not be heard. Omphale was about to lead me off when the perfidious Raphael, casting another lubricious glance upon me notwithstanding the cruel state to which I had been reduced, declared that he would not allow me to be dismissed without making me his victim one more time. No sooner was the scheme conceived than it was carried out. But since his desires now required an extra degree of stimulation, it was not until he had fully employed the cruel expedients favoured by Jerome that he succeeded in finding the powers necessary for the execution of his latest

crime. What new heights of debauchery were there scaled! Great God, how was it that these lechers could be so savage as to choose an instant of agonizing spiritual crisis such as the one through which I was then passing to inflict upon me its barbarous physical counterpart?

‘By God!’ said Antonin as he too resumed with me, ‘there is nothing finer than to follow the example set by a Superior, and nothing spicier than to repeat a crime. They say that pain is conducive to pleasure, and I am persuaded that this delicious child will make me the happiest of mortals.’

And notwithstanding my struggles, my screams, and my supplications, I became once more the hapless butt of the wretch’s outrageous urges . . . Finally, I was allowed to quit the room.

‘If,’ said Clement, ‘I had not been quite so premature when our beautiful princess first arrived, she would not leave the room without serving my passions a second time. But she will lose nothing by waiting.’

‘I can promise her as much,’ said Jerome, and as I passed by him he let me feel the weight of his arm. ‘But for tonight, let us retire to our beds.’

Raphael being of the same mind, the orgies ceased. He kept Florette by him—and doubtless she remained there the whole night—while the rest of the company went their several ways. I was given into the keeping of Omphale, a sort of Sultanness who, being older than the others, appeared to me to have charge of the sisters. She led me into our common apartment in a kind of square tower with a bed in each corner for each of the four of us. By custom, one of the friars always followed their women as they retired, securing the door with two or three bolts. It was Clement who carried out this duty. Once inside, it was impossible to get out again, there being no other exit apart from a small adjoining closet designed for our ease and our toilets, which had a window as closely barred as the one in the chamber where we slept. The place was, furthermore, sparsely furnished: a chair and bedside table curtained off by a piece of cheap calico, one or two wooden chests in the closet, close-stools, bidets, and a dressing-table for our common use. It was not until the next morning that I observed these things, for during that initial instant I had no thought but for my sufferings. ‘O just Heaven!’ said I to myself, ‘so it is indeed written that no act of virtue shall go forth from my heart but that it is immediately followed by its punishment! What wrong did I commit, my God, by wishing to call on this house and follow some slight religious observance? Did I offend against Heaven by wishing so to do and was this my reward for making the attempt? O incomprehensible decrees of Providence, grant me, I beg, a moment’s clear view of your laws if it is not your design to drive me to revolt against them!’ Bitter tears followed these reflections and I was still wet with them when Omphale drew near to my bed as day was about to break.

‘Dear sister,’ said she, ‘I come to urge you to take heart. During my first days here, I wept as you do, but now habit prevails and you will get used to things as I have. The first times are horrible. It is not simply that we are endlessly forced to satisfy the unbridled lust of debauched men which makes our life such torture: it is the loss of liberty and the brutal way we are treated in this infamous place. Those who are wretched are consoled when they see those around them suffer; however much my wounds smarted, I soothed them by asking one of my companions to acquaint me with the further ills which lay in wait for me. ‘Listen,’ said Omphale, sitting at the head of my bed, ‘I am going to speak to you in all honesty, but remember: you must never abuse my trust. The most cruel of our sufferings, my dear, is not knowing what our fate will be: we have no way of knowing what will happen to us when we leave here. We have as much evidence as our solitude allows us to acquire that girls dismissed from this place are never seen again in the world outside. The friars themselves give us notice of this, for they do not hide from us that



this retreat is also our grave. Even so, hardly a year goes by but that two or three girls leave. What happens to them? Do the friars make an end of them? At times they claim that they do and at other times they say that they don't, but none of those who have gone away, however sincerely they swore to lodge a formal complaint against the monastery and to work for our release, not one I say has ever kept her word. Do the friars see to it that the complaints are hushed up or do they ensure that the girls are in no state to make them? When we ask new arrivals for news of those who have left, they invariably know nothing about them. So what happens to the poor creatures? That is what makes us sick with worry, Sophie, that is the fatal uncertainty which makes our lives so anguished and wretched. I have been in this house for fourteen years and I have seen above fifty girls go hence. Where are they now? Why, since all gave their oath to help us, why has none ever been true to her word? Our number is fixed at four, at least as regards this chamber, for we are all convinced that there is another tower corresponding to ours where they keep a similar contingent. All manner of things the friars do and say have persuaded us that this is so. But if these fellow-sufferers do indeed exist, we have never seen them. One of the strongest pieces of evidence we have for their presence is that we are never on duty on succeeding days. We were required yesterday; so today we rest. For it is quite clear that our lechers never allow themselves a single day's abstinence. In practice, no known principles determine the moment of our superannuation, not age, nor fading charms, nor on their part lassitude or revulsion, nothing save their whim decides when they give us the fatal quietus and we have no means of telling if our dismissal is to benefit us or not. I have known here an inmate aged 70; she left just last summer, having been in this place for sixty years. Whereas they kept her on, I saw a good dozen sent away, none being aged above 16. Some I have seen leave three days after their arrival, some within a month, and others besides at the end of several years: in this matter there is no rule beyond their will, or rather their caprice. Nor does our conduct enter into it: I have known some girls prepared to go more than half-way to anticipate their desires who were dismissed after six weeks while others who were surly and temperamental were kept on for many years. It is therefore but a waste of breath to prescribe to a new arrival the kind of conduct she should observe, for our masters' fantastical whims overturn all laws and there is no logic in them. The friars do not vary a great deal. Raphael arrived fifteen years ago, Clement has lived in this place for sixteen years, Jerome has been here for thirty and Antonin for ten: he has been the only one to come in my time. He took the place of a friar aged 60 who died in the course of one particularly frenzied orgy. Raphael, a Florentine by birth, is a close relative of the Pope with whom he is on the best of terms. It is only since his coming that the miraculous Virgin has brought the house a measure of reputation which prevents prying eyes from taking too close an interest in what goes on here, but the monastery was as you see it now when he first arrived. It has been, so it is said, on the same footing for almost eighty years and all the Superiors appointed have continued to run its affairs in a way entirely favourable to their pleasures. Raphael, one of the most depraved churchmen of the century, arranged to be sent here only because he already knew what it was like and his intention is to preserve its secret privileges for as long as he can. We are part of the diocese of Auxerre but whether the bishop has knowledge of what transpires here or not, we never see him within these walls. Indeed, few visitors ever appear here. Except during the time of the matronal festival at the end of August, scarcely ten persons come throughout the whole of the year. But when outsiders do appear, the Superior is most careful to receive them well and to impress them with an infinite show of austerity and piety; they go away content and speak warmly of the monastery, and in this way the impunity enjoyed by these scoundrels has become rooted in the good faith of the people and the credulity of the faithful. Yet

there are no stricter rules than those which govern our conduct and nothing more dangerous to us than to breach them in the smallest particular. It is vital that I should go into this matter with you in some detail,' continued my instructress, 'for it is no excuse here to say: "Do not punish me for breaking such and such a law for I did not know it existed." It is for each newcomer to seek instruction from her companions or else to work it out for herself: no one is informed about anything but every infringement is punished. The only form of correction allowed is the Lash, for it was logical that a rite which forms part of the pleasures of these wicked men should become their favoured form of punishment. You felt its bite yesterday having done no wrong; you will feel it again soon enough for committing some fault. All four are obsessed by this barbarous flagellating mania and each takes turns to act as chastiser. Each day there is one who is named Regent-in-Charge. He receives the reports submitted by the Doyenne of the inmates, has the running of the seraglio, makes all the arrangements for the suppers to which we are admitted, and frames accusations of misconduct which he himself then punishes. But let us look more closely at each of these heads. We are all required to be up and dressed by nine in the morning. At ten we are brought bread and water for luncheon. At two, dinner is served: it generally consists of a quite acceptable potage, a piece of boiled meat, a dish of vegetables, sometimes a little fruit, and a bottle of wine which we share. Punctually each day, winter and summer, the Regent calls on us at five o'clock. It is then that he hears the Doyenne who informs on her companions. The only complaints she is authorized to make concern the behaviour of the girls in her chamber: whether any words of ill humour or sedition have been spoken; whether all rose at the appointed time; whether face and hair were carefully groomed and hygiene thoroughly attended to; whether all have eaten properly; and whether any have talked of escape. The Doyenne is required to render an exact account of all these matters, for we ourselves run the risk of punishment if we are remiss. Next, the Regent goes into our closet where he inspects divers objects. When he has done, it is rare that he leaves without taking his pleasure with one of us, and frequent that he does so with all four. Once he has gone, unless it be our Supper Day, we are free to read or chat, amuse ourselves as we choose and retire to bed when we will. But if we are to sup that evening with the friars, a bell is rung which tells us that it is time to prepare. The Regent himself comes to fetch us, we go down to the room where you first saw us, and the first thing to be done is the reading out of the catalogue of faults committed by us since our last appearance. First come infractions committed during the previous supper: examples of remissness, instances of cool responses to the friars at those moments when we serve their desires, plus any failure of attentiveness, submission, or cleanliness. To this is added the list of offences committed in our chamber in the space of the intervening two days as recorded by the Doyenne. The delinquents advance in turn to the middle of the room. The Regent states the charge and confronts the accused with their crime. They are then stripped naked by the Doyenne (or the vice-Doyenne in cases where the Doyenne is at fault), and the Regent administers the prescribed punishment in a manner so energetic that they find it difficult to forget. So skilled at the business are these awful men that it is virtually impossible for there to be a single day when one or two chastisements are not administered. Once these matters are over, the orgies begin. It would be quite impossible for me to list all the variants in detail: could such bizarre whims ever be catalogued? Our prime objective is never to refuse them anything. . . and always to anticipate. But even when we observe this rule, however sound it may be, we are still sometimes none too safely off. Half-way through the orgies, supper is served. We are permitted to share the meal which is always finer and more sumptuous than those which we are served. The bacchanalia resumes when the friars are half-drunk. At midnight, they disperse, but each has the right to keep

one of us by him through the night, the chosen favourite sleeping in the cell of the friar who selected her, being restored to us on the morrow. The rest retire and on returning find the chamber cleaned, the beds made, and our clothes-boxes tidied. Sometimes of a morning, as soon as we are up and about, before luncheon, it may occur that a friar will send for one of us to go to his cell. The Brother who sees to our menial needs then comes to fetch us and escorts us to the friar who desires us; the friar either brings us back himself or has it done by the same Brother the moment he tires of us. The Cerberus who cleans our apartments and occasionally escorts us is an aged monk whom you will see presently. He is 70 years old, has one eye, limps, and is dumb. Responsible for the running of the entire establishment, he is aided by three other monks: one to prepare the food, one to clean the cells of the friars, sweep all through the buildings and help in the kitchen, and lastly the porter whom you encountered when you arrived. Of these, we see only the Brother who serves us; the briefest word to him would count as one of our most serious offences. The Superior occasionally comes to call on us. At these times, there are a number of ceremonial customs which you will learn by practice: failure to observe them is a crime, for the desire the friars have to seek out infractions so that they might have the pleasure of punishing them leads them to find more and more faults daily. It is rarely without some scheme in mind that Raphael pays us a visit and his schemes are unfailingly cruel or lewd as you have had ample opportunity to learn for yourself. For the rest, being securely shut up always, there is no occasion during the year when we are allowed to take the air; though there is a very large garden, yet there are no gates to it for they fear an escape which would be highly dangerous since by information laid before the Justices and Mother Church regarding all the crimes which are committed in this place, matters here would soon be set to rights. We never practise the least religious observance; we are as forbidden to think of it as to speak thereof: any such talk is one of the wrongs which most surely receives punishment. And that is the sum of what I can tell you, my dear,' added our Doyenne. 'Experience will teach you the rest. Take heart if you can, but give up all thought of escape, for there has never been a girl yet who left this prison and saw the outside world again.'

This last comment making me horribly uneasy, I asked Omphale what she really thought had become of the girls who had been sent away.

'What sort of answer do you expect me to give you?' said she, 'for hope springs up eternally to contradict my dismal opinion. Everything tells me beyond doubting that a grave is their final refuge—yet every instant brings a crowd of thoughts born of hope to overturn my all too fatal conviction. We are not informed,' Omphale went on, 'until the morning of the day they intend to be rid of us. The Regent comes before our luncheon is served, saying, as I imagine: "Omphale, pack your bag, the monastery is sending you away. I shall come for you when it gets dark", and then he goes out. The girl who has been dismissed embraces her companions and promises over and over to help them, to lodge complaints, to raise a clamour about what goes on here. The hour tolls, the friar comes, the girl goes . . . and is never heard of again. Yet if it is a Supper Day, then everything carries on as usual. All we have noted on those days is that the friars exert themselves much less, drink a great deal more, send us away much earlier, and take no one into their beds.'

'Dear Omphale,' said I to the Doyenne as I thanked her for instructing me, 'perhaps you never had to deal before except with children who had not strength enough to keep their word. Are you willing to make that same mutual promise with me? I shall begin by swearing in advance upon everything I hold most sacred that I shall make an end of these infamies or die in the attempt. Do you promise me as much on your side?'

'With all my heart,' said Omphale, 'but you must appreciate that such promises are quite futile. Girls older than you, and more outraged too if that is possible, who belonged to the best

families in the province and were therefore far better armed, the kind of girls who would have given their life's blood for me, have broken the self-same oaths before. Please understand therefore if my cruel experience leads me to consider the pledge we have just sworn to be meaningless and to say that I do not place more hope in it than in the others.'

We then talked of the characters of the friars and of our companions.

'There are no men in Europe', said Omphale, 'more dangerous than Raphael and Antonin. Their natural qualities are duplicity, villainy, spite, nastiness, cruelty, and irreligion. Joy never sparkles in their eyes except when they are most fully launched upon their vices. Clement who appears to be the gruffest of the four is in fact the best of them, for he is to be feared only when in his cups; but when he is, you must take great care not to cross him, for doing so can often be a highly risky affair. As to Jerome, he is naturally brutal, and cuffs, kicks, and punches are common coin with him, though when his passions are spent he becomes as gentle as a lamb, which is an important difference between him and the first two who revive their flagging desires only by committing the most perfidious and appalling actions. Turning to the girls, the Doyenne went on, 'there is really very little to say. Florette is a child who is none too intelligent and can be twisted around anyone's little finger. Cornélie has a good heart and a fund of fine feelings: she is utterly inconsolable and cannot be reconciled to her fate.'

When I had noted all this information, I asked my companion if it were indeed quite impossible to discover whether there was or not a second tower containing other unfortunates besides ourselves.

'If they exist, and I am virtually certain they do,' said Omphale, 'we shall never know unless it be through some indiscretion on the part of the friars or the mute Brother who serves us and doubtless attends to their needs also. But such knowledge would be a source of great danger. For what purpose would be served by knowing whether we are alone here or not, since we have no means of helping each other? If you ask what grounds I have for saying that their existence is more than likely, then I shall tell you: a number of remarks the friars have let slip without thinking are more than enough to persuade us that such is the case. Moreover, I was once leaving Raphael's cell in the morning after a night spent there, and was stepping through his door and he was about to follow me and bring me back here himself, when I saw without his noticing the mute Brother going into Antonin's with a very pretty girl aged about 17 or 18 who was certainly not one of us. Seeing that he was observed, the Brother pushed her hurriedly into Antonin's cell—but not before I got a clear view of her. He did not report me and the matter was left there. Had it been made public, I might perhaps have bought my knowledge dear. So it is quite certain that there are women here other than ourselves, and since we sup with the friars every two days, they must sup with them on the intervening days, and most likely are as many as we are.'

Omphale had scarcely finished speaking when Florette returned from Raphael's cell where she had spent the night. It was expressly forbidden for girls to tell each other what had happened when they had been chosen and, seeing that we were awake, she simply murmured a 'good-morning' and threw herself exhausted on to her bed where she remained until nine o'clock, which was our time for getting up. The tender Cornélie came up to me and, weeping as she looked at me, said:

'Oh, my dear mademoiselle! What wretched creatures we are!'

Luncheon was brought, my companions forced me to take a little nourishment and I ate something for their sakes. The day passed quietly enough. At five, as Omphale had said, the Regent for that day entered: it was Antonin. With a laugh he asked me how I was after my adventure and, since the only answer I could give him was to lower my tear-filled eyes, he said

sneeringly:

‘She’ll learn. There is not a convent in the whole of France where girls get a better education than they are given here.’

He completed his inspection and took the list of offences from the Doyenne who, being too good-hearted to overfill it, very often said that there was nothing to report. Before leaving us, Antonin came up to me. I shuddered, for I believed I was about to become the monster’s victim once more—though since I might be at any time, what did it matter if the thing happened then or the next day? However, I was let off with some rough fondling and he leaped instead upon Cornélie and, busying himself with her, ordered all of us present to help stimulate his passions. Already replete with sensuality, the beast, grudging himself no form of voluptuousness, ended his business with the hapless creature exactly as he had with me the evening before, which is to say with the most considered excesses of brutality and lewdness. Group enactments of this kind were a pretty regular occurrence. It was more or less customary that when a friar took his pleasure with one of us sisters, the other three should gather round and stimulate his senses in every manner conceivable so that he should be aware of his sensuality through each and every one of his organs. I set down these loathsome details here so that I shall not have to return to them again, it not being my purpose to dwell further on the obscenity of these occasions. To describe one is to describe them all and, of my long sojourn in that place, my design is to speak to you only of happenings of any significance and not to appal you further with the details. As it was not a Supper Day for us, we were left quite to ourselves. My companions consoled me as best they could, but nothing could assuage sorrows as deep as mine. They strove in vain, for the more they spoke of my misfortunes, the more desperate those misfortunes seemed.

The following morning at nine o’clock, the Superior came to see me, though it was not his day to do so, and asked Omphale if I was beginning to set my mind to make the best of my plight. Without waiting for a reply, he opened one of the chests in our closet and took several women’s garments from it:

‘Since you brought no raiment with you,’ said he, ‘we must give some thought to what you shall wear, a little more perhaps for our sake than for yours. There is no need therefore to be grateful. I am not myself in favour of all this pointless dressing up. If we were to allow the girls who serve our needs to go about as naked as the beasts of the field, it strikes me that the drawbacks of such a proceeding would be of little consequence. But the friars are men of the world and demand luxury and finery, and they must be satisfied.’

On to the bed he tossed a number of dishabilles together with a half-dozen shifts, several bonnets, stockings, and shoes, and bade me try them all. He watched as I put them on and did not miss a single opportunity for indecent fondlings which the situation gave rise to. There were two or three loose gowns of taffeta and one of India cotton which all fitted me tolerably well. These he allowed me to keep and told me to suit myself as to the remainder, reminding me however that they were all House Property and saying that they were to be returned if I should chance to leave before wearing any of them out. These various proceedings affording a number of spectacles which raised him to boiling pitch, he ordered me to adopt the attitude which I knew suited him best. I was minded to entreat for mercy but seeing the rage and anger already ashine in his eyes, I judged that the speediest issue was through obedience and I took up my position . . . The libertine, abetted by the three other women, took his pleasure as was his wont at the cost of morality, religion, and Nature. I had roused him to a fever. At supper, he made much of me and I was designated to spend the night with him. My companions withdrew and I passed into his apartment. I shall say no more of my loathing or my sufferings, Madame, for you can doubtless

picture both to be extreme, and my monotonous retailing of them would perhaps blunt the edge of what I have yet to tell. Raphael occupied a very pretty cell which had been furnished voluptuously and in the finest taste: nothing was lacking which could render this private place as pleasant as it was purpose-made for pleasure. When we were inside, Raphael, stripping naked and bidding me to do likewise, took a good long time to be brought to a peak of excitement by the self-same methods with which, as the active agent in the business, he next inflamed his own passions. I can state here that during that night I followed as complete a course of lewd conduct as any supplied to the best taught harlot who has been schooled in these foul exercises. From being the mistress, I soon passed to the status of pupil once more, but durst not treat as I was treated, and though I was never asked to stay my hand I was quickly reduced to pleading, weeping hot tears, that he stayed his. But my entreaties were met with scoffing, my attempts at evading him were nullified by the most barbarous counters and, once he observed that I was mastered, I was subjected to unparalleled brutality for two hours and more. He did not limit himself to the bodily parts reserved for such matters but wandered everywhere without distinction: the most contrary places, the most delicate globes, nothing escaped the fury of my tormentor whose *frissons* of sensuality received their impetus from the symptoms of pain upon which his hungry eyes feasted.

‘And now to bed,’ said he at the last. ‘Perhaps you have had enough, but I certainly have not. I never weary of this most holy order of worship, and all we have done thus far is no more than a faint image of pleasure as it might really be.’

We got into the bed. There, Raphael, his lasciviousness as unabated as his depravity, held me all night, the slave of his criminal desires. Thinking him momentarily assuaged, I took advantage of a brief interval of calm in these debauches to beseech him to tell me if I could ever hope to quit the house one day.

‘Most certainly,’ Raphael answered, ‘you were allowed entry only on that basis. When all four of us are agreed that you should be permitted to leave, then leave you most certainly shall.’

‘But,’ said I, thinking to extract something more definite from him, ‘do you not fear that girls who are younger and far less discreet than I swear to be all my life, might not on occasion make disclosures about what is done here?’

‘That would be impossible,’ said the Superior.

‘Impossible?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Perhaps you would explain . . .’

‘No. It’s our secret. All I can tell you is that, discreet or not discreet, once you are outside it will be quite impossible for you ever to reveal anything of what goes on within these walls.’

And so saying, he ordered me roughly to speak of other things and I dared not enquire further. At seven in the morning, he ordered the Brother to escort me back and, putting what he had said to me together with what I had learned from Omphale, I convinced myself, over-pessimistically perhaps, that it was only too plain that the most violent measures were taken against girls who left the house, and that if they never raised a hue and cry, it was because they were prevented from doing so by being shut up in a coffin. I remained all atremble at this terrible thought for some time until, managing at the last to overcome it by the force of hope, I fell into the same dull state as my companions.

Within the space of a week, I had done the rounds of the four friars and during this time had ample opportunity to observe the various aberrant and infamous practices perpetrated in turn by each of them. But with them as with Raphael, the torch of libertinage was lit only by excesses of

brutality. It was as though this vice of their corrupt hearts was the organ which stimulated all the rest, and it seemed that only by giving vent to it could their efforts be crowned with pleasure.

Antonin was the friar at whose hands I suffered most. It is impossible to imagine how far the wretch carried cruelty in the course of his ecstatic frenzies. He was unfailingly guided by his sombre urges: they were the true masters of his pleasure, they continued to fuel his desire even at the peak of his enjoyment, and they alone revived it when his passion was near to being spent. Given all this, I was amazed that the methods he used, for all the severity of their application, never ended with the impregnation of any of his victims. I asked our Doyenne by what means he managed to avoid such an eventuality.

‘By immediately destroying,’ Omphale told me, ‘any consequence of his ardour. As soon as he has an indication of its early progress, he forces us on three days running to swallow six large glasses of a certain tea or infusion which, by the fourth day, leaves no trace of his intemperance. Cornélie has just had it happen to her. It has happened to me on three occasions. There is no adverse effect on our health. Indeed, it appears that we all feel much the better for it. But as you will have observed, he is the only one of the four with whom we need anticipate this danger. The irregular desires of each of the others leave us nothing to fear from them on that score.’

Then Omphale asked me if it were not true that of all the friars Clement was the one of whom I had least to complain.

‘Alas,’ said I, ‘surrounded as I am by horrors and obscenities which both sicken and revolt me, I should have the greatest difficulty in saying which one wearies me least. They all exhaust me and I wish I were already free of this place, whatever fate awaits me.’

‘But it is possible that you will have your wish soon,’ Omphale went on. ‘You came here quite by chance, and they had not counted on your coming. A week before you arrived, a girl had just been sent away, and they never send anyone away unless they are quite sure of having a replacement. They are not always the ones who select new recruits. They have well-paid agents who serve them zealously. I am pretty certain that a new girl will be coming at any moment and your wish might well be granted. Moreover, the matronal festival is almost upon us. It is rare that the event passes without bringing them some advantage: either they use the confessional to seduce a few young girls or else they shut one of them up here, but it is most unusual that the occasion passes without some tasty morsel being snapped up.’

The great day finally arrived. Would you believe, Madame, to what depths of monstrous impiety the friars sank during the festival? They fancied that a visible miracle would considerably enhance their good name and consequently dressed Florette, who was the youngest and smallest of us, in all the Virgin’s finery, secured her fast around the waist by ropes which could not be seen, and ordered her to raise her arms solemnly heavenwards when the host was lifted up. Since the unhappy creature was threatened with the most cruel treatment if she uttered a single word or failed to carry out her role, she performed to the best of her ability and the fraud was every whit as successful as could have been wished for. The congregation acclaimed a miracle, gave rich offerings to the Virgin, and went away more convinced than ever of the mercy of the Heavenly Mother.

To crown their impiety, the libertines required Florette to appear at supper dressed in the costume which had brought her such homage, and each inflamed his odious desires by subjecting her, she still wearing the same vestments, to his lewd whims. Excited by this initial crime, the monsters did not stop there. They then made her lie face down, unclothed, upon a large table, lit candles, placed a figure of Our Lord next her head, and dared celebrate the most awful of our mysteries upon her bare back. I fainted at the horrible sight of it, being unable to bear the

spectacle. Seeing this, Raphael declared that, to break me to their ways, I should serve as altar in my turn. I was seized and placed where Florette had been and the foul Italian, enacting much crueller and infinitely more sacrilegious rites, consummated over me the same horror which he had the moment before performed over my companion. I was dragged from there unconscious and had to be carried back to the chamber where for three days I wept the bitterest tears over the hideous crime in which I had, though against my will, participated. The memory of it still racks my heart, Madame, and I cannot think of it without weeping. In me, religion is a function of my sensibility and anything which offends or outrages my faith makes the blood drain from my heart.

Meanwhile, it did not seem to us that the new companion we were expecting had been taken from among the vast concourse of people who had been drawn by the festival. A new recruit might have been made to the other seraglio, but no one came to ours. And so everything continued in the same manner for two weeks more. I had been in that hateful place for six weeks when Raphael came to our tower one morning at about nine o'clock. He appeared to be very restive and a kind of madness gleamed in his eyes. He examined each of us, made us adopt his favoured position one after the other, and came to a noticeable halt at Omphale. He stood there for several minutes gazing at her in that posture, exciting himself quietly, trying out one of his choicest fantasies, but without consummation. Then, ordering her to her feet, he stared at her very sternly for a while and, with ferocity painted upon every feature of his face, said:

'You have served us long enough. Our fraternity hereby dismisses you and I have come to give you notice of it. Make ready. I shall come for you myself as darkness falls.'

So saying, he examined her once more with the same severe look in his eye and left the chamber abruptly.

The instant he had gone, Omphale threw herself into my arms.

'Oh, the moment has come,' said she through her tears, 'which I have been both dreading and longing for. O God! What will become of me?'

I did all I could to calm her, but without success. She swore by the most expressive oaths that she would stint no effort to see that we were delivered and to lay information against our perfidious captors, if she were given the opportunity to do so, and her manner of giving me these pledges left me not an instant's doubt that either she would do it or else the thing could not be done at all. The day passed like any other and at about six o'clock, Raphael himself returned.

'Come,' he said sharply to Omphale, 'are you ready?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Let us go then, and go quickly.'

'Will you allow me to embrace my companions?'

'That is quite unnecessary,' said the friar, pulling her away by the arm. 'You are stayed for. Follow me.'

Then she asked whether she was to bring her bundle with her.

'Bring nothing, nothing at all,' said Raphael. 'Is not everything here House Property? You will have no further need of these things.'

Then correcting himself like someone who has said too much, he added:

'These clothes will be of no further use to you. You will have others made to measure which will suit you better.'

I asked the friar if he would permit me to accompany Omphale as far as the monastery gate, but he answered with so savage, so wild a look that I recoiled in fear and dared not repeat my request. Our hapless companion left us, casting me a glance as she went which brimmed with



disquiet and tears, and the moment she was gone all three of us gave way to the sorrow of the parting. A half-hour later, Antonin came to fetch us to supper. Raphael did not appear until about an hour after we had gone down. He looked extremely agitated, whispered much to the others, and yet everything passed off much as usual. However, I noticed, as Omphale had led me to expect, that we were sent to our chambers much earlier and that the monks, who drank vaster quantities than was their wont, made do with stimulating their desires without ever permitting their consummation. What could be deduced from these observations? I remarked all these things because everything is noticed in such circumstances, but as to telling what followed from them, I had not wit enough to see and perhaps I should not bother to tell you now of these circumstances had they not made such a singular impact upon me.

We spent four days waiting for news of Omphale, one moment not doubting but that she would without fail honour the pledge she had given, and the next quite convinced that the cruel measures taken against her would make it impossible for her to serve us in any way. We despaired then and our anxieties reached a new pitch. The fourth day after Omphale's departure, we were escorted down to supper in accordance with the normal state of affairs, but what was our surprise when all three of us beheld a new companion enter from an outside door at the very moment when we appeared through ours!

'Mesdemoiselles, this is the recruit our fraternity has chosen to replace the girl who has lately left us,' declared Raphael. 'Pray have a thought to live with her as with a sister and to ease her passage in those matters which are yours to decide. Sophie,' said the Superior, turning to me, 'you are the oldest in the class and I hereby raise you to the position of Doyenne. You are acquainted with the duties of the post. Take care to carry them out punctually.'

I sorely wanted to refuse, but it was impossible for me to do so, for I was eternally obliged to sacrifice my own wishes and desires to those of my evil captors. I bowed my head and promised to see to everything in a way which would content him.

Then, from the head and shoulders of our new companion were removed the mantles and veils which hid her face and figure, and we beheld a girl of 15 years endowed with the most expressive and delicate physiognomy. Her eyes, though wet with tears, seemed to us quite magnificent: she raised them with such grace to each one of us that I can state now that never did I see a look more touching in all my life. She had long fair hair which cascaded over her shoulders in natural curls, and a fresh, rosy mouth. She carried her head nobly and there was something so attractive in her general bearing that it was impossible to see her without feeling drawn towards her. We learned soon enough from her own lips (and I include it here so that I may make one piece of all that concerns her) that her name was Octavie, that she was the daughter of a prosperous merchant at Lyons, that she had just finished her education in Paris, that she had been returning thence to her parents' house in the company of a governess when, being attacked at night on the road between Auxerre and Vermenton, she had been abducted against her will and brought to the monastery, and that she had been unable to discover news of the coach in which she had ridden or of the woman who had accompanied her. She had been kept locked up by herself in a confined cell for above an hour where she had surrendered to her despair, and then had been fetched away to join our company without any of the friars having yet spoken one word to her.

The four libertines, momentarily struck with ecstasy at the spectacle of so many charms, had strength only to admire. The power of beauty imposes respect, and the most corrupt of scoundrels cannot help but pay a kind of worshipful tribute which cannot be transgressed without feelings of remorse. But monsters such as those with whom we had to deal do not allow such a

brake to check their course for long.

‘Come, Mademoiselle,’ said the Superior, ‘pray show us if the remainder of your charms answer those which Nature has so liberally scattered upon your face.’

And as the beautiful creature grew uneasy and blushed, not understanding what was meant, the brutal Antonin seized her by the arm and shouted curses and reprimands at her far too indecent for me to repeat:

‘Don’t you understand, little Miss Prig, that what you are being told to do is to strip naked as quick as you like!’

There followed more tears and further efforts at resistance. But Clement immediately took hold of her and within one minute had sent flying off everything which had veiled the alluring creature’s maidenly modesty. The charms which decency normally required Octavie to keep hidden could not have been a better riposte to the delights which usage allowed her to display. It is unlikely that a whiter skin or more pleasing forms were ever seen, and yet so much freshness and innocence and delicacy were about to fall to these barbarous men. It was only to be defiled by them, it seemed, that Nature had showered her with so many advantages. The circle formed around her and, exactly as had happened with me, she was passed round in all directions. Antonin, in a fury, had not strength enough to resist: a cruel onslaught upon Octavie’s budding charms decided the homage to be paid and incense smoked at the feet of the god. Raphael, of a mind to think of more serious matters, but in no state to be patient, seized the victim and positioned her according to his desires. Since she did nothing to accommodate him, he beseeched Clement to hold her for him. Octavie wept but her wailings went unheard. Fire blazed in the eyes of the execrable Italian. Master of the fortress which he was about to take by storm, it was as if he paused to examine his ways forward the better to overcome all resistance: he neither employed ruse nor lingered over preparations. However great the disproportion between attacker and defender, the former did not hesitate to launch his onslaught. A heart-rending scream from the victim announced her final capitulation. But nothing could move the heart of her proud conqueror. The more she seemed to beg for mercy, the more ferociously he pressed her and, following my example, the hapless girl was ignominiously defiled while never ceasing to be a maid.

‘Never was a prize more difficult to win,’ said Raphael, regaining his composure. ‘For the first time in my life, I thought I would fail in my attempt.’

‘Let me take it from here,’ said Antonin, preventing her from rising, ‘there is more than one breach in the rampart and you have taken only one of them.’

So saying, he advanced proudly to do battle and a moment later was master of the field. More groans were heard...

‘God be praised!’ said the horrid ghoul, ‘I should have been uncertain of the completeness of the defeat but for the squawking of the vanquished. I value my triumphs only when it has cost tears.’

‘In truth,’ said Jerome, advancing with a bundle of wands in his hand, ‘I shall not disturb her pleasant pose either, for it could not be better suited to what I have in mind.’

He gazed, touched, and felt, and then all at once the air was filled with a hideous swishing sound. The beautiful flesh changed colour, brightest crimson mingling with the whiteness of the lily. But what might on another occasion have afforded Love a moment of innocent diversion had moderation directed this maniacal practice, now turned instantly into a criminal act. No consideration stayed the hand of the heartless friar: the more the pupil moaned, the more strictly the master applied himself. Every part received equal treatment and none obtained grace in his

sight. Soon there was not a single part of that beautiful body but bore the mark of his barbarity and it was over the bloody remnants of his odious pleasures that the perfidious friar finally quenched his burning fires.

‘I shall be gentler by far than all that has gone before,’ said Clement, taking the girl in his arms and planting an impure kiss upon her coral lips. ‘Here is the altar on which I shall make my sacrifice.’

A few kisses more on those adorable lips, made by Venus herself, served to stoke him to new heights. He forced upon the unhappy girl the infamies which were his delectation and the sweetest refuge of love was befouled by horror.

The rest of the evening proved to be much like what you know of those occasions, with this difference, viz., that the beauty and touching youth of the girl inflamed the barbarians more effectively, so that their savagery was increased several fold and it was satiety rather than compassion which, having first sent her off to our chamber, restored to her, at least for a few hours, the calm of which she stood in such need. I should have liked to have been able to comfort her, at least on that first night, but, being required to spend it with Antonin, it was on the contrary I who might well have been reduced to needing succour. I had had the misfortune not to please, the word is quite unsuitable, but to excite more ardently than any of my companions the lecher’s foul desires, and for a long time past very few weeks had gone by when I did not spend five or six nights in his room. When I got back the next morning, I found the new inmate in tears. I told her what I had formerly been told to calm me, but I had no more success with her than had been obtained with me. It is no easy thing to find solace for such an abrupt change in one’s circumstances. Moreover, the girl had a great fund of piety, virtue, honour, and fine feeling, and in consequence her present state seemed all the more cruel to her. Raphael, who had taken a great fancy to her, kept her by him several nights running, and little by little she did as the rest did: she found consolation for her misfortunes in the hope of seeing them ended one day. Omphale had been right to say that seniority had no effect upon our being sent away, for the matter being dictated solely by the friars’ whims or perhaps by subsequent girl-hunts outside, it could as well come after a week as after twenty years. Octavie had been with us for less than six weeks when Raphael came one day and told her she was to leave. She made us the same promises as Omphale had given and disappeared just as she had without our ever hearing what became of her.

We remained for about a month without seeing a new face arrive to take her place. It was during this interval that I, like Omphale, had occasion to be convinced that we were not the only women to live in the monastery and that there was another building which doubtless contained the same complement as ours. But Omphale had been able to do no more than surmise; my adventure, being much more conclusive, confirmed my own suspicions fully. This is how it came about. I had just spent the night with Raphael and was leaving his cell according to the customary practice at about seven in the morning when a Brother, as old and repulsive as ours, whom I had never seen before, suddenly debouched into the corridor with a tall girl of 18 or 20 who struck me as being beautiful enough to have sat for a painter. Raphael, who was to escort me back to our chamber, kept me waiting. He emerged as I came positively face to face with the girl; the Brother did not know what to do with her to get her out of my sight.

‘Where are you taking that creature?’ shouted the Superior in a fury.

‘I’m bringing her to you, Reverend Father,’ said the ghoulish go-between. ‘Your Grace has perhaps forgotten that you gave me the order last night.’

‘I said nine o’clock.’

‘Seven, Monsignor. You told me you wanted to see her before you said mass.’

All this time, I stood gazing at this companion who stared back with the same astonishment.

‘Come, the matter is of no importance,’ said Raphael, ushering me back into his cell and bringing the other girl in too. ‘Look here, Sophie,’ said he, shutting the door, ‘this girl holds the same position in another tower as you hold in yours: she too is a Doyenne. No harm will be done by allowing both our Doyennes to meet and, that you may know her thoroughly, Sophie, I shall now show you Marianne undressed.’

This Marianne, who appeared to me to be a very forward sort of girl, disrobed in a twinkling and Raphael, bidding me stimulate his desires, subjected her to his choicest pleasures as I looked on.

‘That is what I wanted with her,’ the blackguard declared when he was satisfied. ‘Spending the night with one woman always makes me want another in the morning. Nothing is quite as insatiable as our urges; the greater the offerings we make to them, the hotter they burn. Of course, the outcome is always pretty much the same, yet we always imagine that there is better just around the corner. The instant our thirst for one woman is slaked is also the moment when the same drives kindle our desire for another. You both hold positions of trust and you must remain silent. Go now, Sophie, go, the Brother will take you back. I have a new mystery to celebrate with your companion here.’

I promised to say nothing as I was bid and went, absolutely certain now that we were not alone in serving the monstrous pleasures of these unbridled libertines.

But Octavie was replaced immediately. A young peasant girl of 12, fresh-faced and pretty but very inferior in beauty to her predecessor, was chosen to fill her shoes. Within two years, I had become the longest server. Florette and Cornélie duly left, both swearing like Omphale that I should hear news of them and neither succeeding any better than she. Both had just been replaced, Florette by a 15-year-old from Dijon, a plump, fat-cheeked creature who had in her favour only the bloom of youth, Cornélie by a girl from Autun, a real beauty, who came of a very upright family. Fortunately the latter, who was 16, had ousted me from my place in Antonin’s affections. But then I realized that if I had been expunged from the lecher’s good graces, I was also in immediate danger of losing my credit with all the others. The fickleness of all four made me tremble for my fate, for I was aware that it signalled my dismissal, and I was only too clear in my mind that my cruel superannuation was tantamount to a sentence of death, not to feel a moment of great alarm. A moment, did I say? Unhappy that I was, could I then still cling on to life? Should not my greatest happiness then be to have had that life ended? These reflections comforted me and helped me await my fate with such resignation that I made no effort to restore my credit. I felt the weight of the friars’ spiteful dealings; hardly a moment went by when they did not find me at fault, scarcely a day when I was not punished. I prayed to Heaven and awaited the sentence. I was perhaps about to be given it when the hand of Providence, wearying of torturing me in the same continuing way, plucked me from my present abyss only to hurl me headlong into another. But let us not anticipate events. Allow me to begin by recounting the circumstances which finally delivered us from the clutches of these arrant libertines.

Of course, the same principle of vice rewarded was to dictate the course of events just as, to my eye, it always had at each crisis of my life. It was written that those who had tortured, humiliated, and chained me would receive, promptly and plain for me to see, high wages for their crimes, as though Providence was bent upon showing me the futility of virtue—a hard lesson which did not alter my ways and which, if I escape the sword which even at this instant hangs over me, shall never prevent my being the eternal slave of the deity which rules my heart.

Quite unexpectedly one morning, Antonin appeared in our chamber and announced that the Reverend Father Raphael, a relative and protege of the Pope, had just been named Vicar-General of the Order of St Francis by His Holiness.

‘And I, my children,’ he said, ‘am to be Superior of the community of Lyons. Two new friars will soon be here to replace us. Indeed they may come before the day is over. We do not know them and it is as likely that they will send you all to your homes as it is that they will keep you here. But whatever your fate, I advise you for your own sakes and for the honour of the two brother friars we leave behind us to conceal all details of our proceedings and to admit only those things which cannot be gainsaid.’

News so flattering to our hopes prevented our denying the friar anything he appeared to desire, and we promised everything he asked yet still the wretch insisted on taking his leave of all four of us together. The end of our misfortunes now half-glimpsed, we had strength enough to bear this final onslaught without complaint. We refused him nothing and he left, never to set eyes on us again. We were served our dinner in the usual way. About two hours after this, Clement came to our chamber with two monks both venerable in age and features.

‘You must confess, Father,’ one of them said to Clement, ‘you must confess that all your debauches have been quite disgraceful and that it is curious indeed that Heaven should have suffered them to continue for so long.’

Clement meekly agreed upon every head, apologizing for the failure of himself and his brother friars to introduce changes and saying that all four of them had found everything in exactly the same state as they now left it, that in truth inmates had come and gone but that, likewise finding the system of rotation in place, they had therefore done no more than follow custom as laid down by their predecessors.

‘Very well,’ resumed the same friar whom I took to be the new Superior, which indeed he was, ‘but let us make an end at once to this execrable debauchery, Father. It would be sickening in men of the world, so I leave you to think how it would be viewed in men of the cloth.’

He next asked us what we wanted to become of us. Each of us answered that she would like to go back whence she had come or to be returned to her family.

‘And so it shall be, my daughters,’ said the friar, ‘and I shall give each of you what money you require to go hence. But it is indispensable that you leave one after the other, at intervals of two days, that you go alone and on foot, and that you say nothing of what has happened in this place.’ We pledged ourselves to abide by these conditions. But the Superior was not satisfied by our word and urged us to partake of the Sacrament. None of us refused and there, kneeling at the altar, he made us swear that we should keep forever secret the things which had happened in the monastery. I did as the others and if, in your hearing, Madame, I now break that promise, it is because I respect the spirit rather than the letter of what the good priest then asked of me. His intention was that no official complaint should ever be made and I am quite certain that my relating of my adventures to you could never possibly result in any unpleasantness for the Order to which the friars belonged. My companions left first and since we were absolutely forbidden to arrange to meet anywhere and had been separated at the time of the arrival of the new Superior, we never saw each other again. I had asked to go to Grenoble and I was given 2 louis to see me there. Donning the clothes I had been wearing on the day I arrived at the monastery, I found the 8 louis which I had with me at that time and, buoyed up with relief that I was forever fleeing that terrifying refuge of vice and that I was leaving it in so easy and so unexpected a manner, I struck out into the forest from which I emerged on the Auxerre road at the same spot where I had left it to walk of my own free will into the trap. It was just three years after I had committed my folly,

that is, I was now 25 years old, or a few weeks off it. My first thought was to throw myself on to my knees and ask God to grant me new pardons for the involuntary offences which I had committed. I did so with even greater compunction than when prostrate before the fouled altars of the ignoble monastery which I had left with such joy in my heart. Tears of regret flowed from my eyes. 'Alas,' said I, 'I was pure when long ago I turned off this very road, being guided by a principle of faith which was so cruelly abused. But in what sorry state do I now find myself!' These bitter reflections being modified somewhat by my pleasure on finding myself free, I went on my way. To avoid boring you further, Madame, with details which I fear would try your patience, I shall henceforward dwell, if you approve, only on those incidents which either taught me important lessons or which further changed the course of my life. After resting for a few days at Lyons, I chanced one day to glance at a foreign gazette belonging to the woman in whose house I lodged. Imagine my surprise on finding therein crime once more rewarded and one of the principal authors of my misfortunes raised to a pinnacle! Rodin, the ignoble doctor who had so cruelly punished me for preventing his committing a murder and had been forced to flee from France no doubt for committing others, had just, according to my news-sheet, been appointed Surgeon-in-Chief to the King of Sweden, a post carrying rich emoluments. 'Let the scoundrel prosper,' said I, 'let him enjoy the fruits, if Providence so wishes, while you, wretch that you are, must go on suffering alone and without complaint since it is written that gall and tribulation are the grim wages of virtue!'

I left Lyons after sojourning three days there and set out on the Dauphiné road, full of wild hope that some small measure of prosperity lay waiting for me in that province. I had scarcely gone two leagues from Lyons, still journeying by foot as was my custom, having a couple of shifts and handkerchiefs in my pouches, when I met an old woman who seemed to be distressed. She came up to me and begged me to give her alms. Being naturally compassionate and knowing no charm on earth comparable to that of helping a fellow human being, I instantly got out my purse intending to take a few coins from it to give to the woman. But the unworthy creature, who was nimbler than I was, though I had at first taken her to be old and broken-winded, adroitly snatched my purse and sent me sprawling with a hefty punch to my stomach. When I next saw her, which was not until I was on my feet again, she was standing a hundred paces off in the company of four rough men who made threatening gestures in my direction each time I tried to approach them. 'O just Heaven!' I cried bitterly, 'so it really is impossible for a virtuous impulse to start within me without its being instantly punished by the cruellest misfortunes I have to fear in the whole universe!' In that dreadful moment, all my courage was on the point of deserting me. Today I entreat Heaven to forgive me, but at that moment rebellion was not far from my heart. Two appalling courses of action now presented themselves to me: I was of a mind either to join up with these footpads who had cruelly wronged me the moment before, or else to go back to Lyons and take to a life of vice. God granted that I did not succumb to either and although the light of hope which He lit once more in my heart was to prove no more than the dawn of more terrible adversities yet to come, I nevertheless give Him thanks for being my prop and my sustainer. The chain of misfortunes which has led me to the scaffold, though I am innocent, will bring me no end but death. Other expedients I might have tried would have brought me shame, remorse, and infamy, and death is less cruel in my eyes than all of these.

I continued on my way, resolving to sell the few effects I had with me when I reached Vienne and thence to strike out for Grenoble. I was walking along dejectedly and was within a quarter of a league from the town when, on a piece of level ground away to the right of the road, I saw two mounted men trampling a third beneath the hooves of their horses. Leaving him for dead, they

galloped off at high speed. This savage spectacle moved me to tears. 'Alas!' said I, 'here is someone even more unfortunate than I. I at least still have my health and my strength, I am able to earn my living and if he is not rich and in the same pass as myself, then he will be a cripple for the rest of his life. And what will become of him then?' However much I ought to have been on my guard against such feelings of compassion, and though the punishment to which they had recently led me was cruel indeed, I could not refrain from heeding them once more. I went up to the dying man. I had with me a little smelling-water which I made him inhale. He opened his eyes to the light, and his first reactions being of gratitude I was prompted to persist in caring for him. I tore one of my shifts for a bandage; it was one of my few remaining effects and I had counted on it to prolong my life, yet I rent it into strips for this man, staunched the blood which flowed from numerous wounds, made him drink a little of the small quantity of wine which I carried in a bottle to revive my faltering steps at weary moments, and used the rest to bathe his bruises. In the end, the unfortunate man suddenly regained both strength and heart. Although he was not mounted and was somewhat casually dressed, he did not appear to be without means, having a few costly items on him, viz., rings, a watch, and other pieces of finery, though his mishap had left them in a sorry state. When at last he was able to speak, he asked me who was the angel of mercy who had helped him and enquired what he could do to show his gratitude. Being guileless enough to believe that a heart bound by gratitude must be mine forever, I believed I could quite safely enjoy the sweet pleasure of sharing my own tears with a man who had the moment before himself been weeping in my arms. I related all my adventures to him. He listened with interest and when I ended with an account of the latest catastrophe to befall me, the telling of which opened his eyes to the cruel state of destitution I was then in, he declared:

'How happy I am at least to be able to say how grateful I feel for everything you have done for me! My name is Dalville,' my adventurer went on, 'and I own a château, a rather fine one, in the mountains fifteen leagues from here. I should very much like to invite you to stay with me there if you would care to come—and lest the invitation should alarm your modesty, allow me to explain at once exactly how you could be useful to me. I am married and my wife needs at her side a woman she can depend upon. We lately dismissed a woman who turned out to be a bad lot. I should like you to take her place.'

I thanked my protector humbly and asked how it chanced that a man such as I took him to be had ventured forth unaccompanied on his travels, thus leaving himself vulnerable to attacks by footpads in the manner he had just experienced.

'Being strong, young, and active,' said Dalville, 'I have long been in the habit of travelling in this fashion from my home to Vienne: both my health and my purse are the better for it. Not that my circumstances are such that I need to worry about expense, for I am rich, thank God, and you should see how rich for yourself by being good enough to accept my offer to come home with me. The two men you saw me fall foul of are a couple of down-at-heel gentlemen who live in the district. They have nothing but a name and a sword, one being a soldier of the Guards and the other a Musketeer, which is to say they are a pair of rogues and cheats. Last week I won a hundred louis from them in a gaming-house at Vienne. Since they were nowhere near having even a fraction of the money between them, I agreed to take their note for the sum. I met up with them today and asked them for what they owe me. You saw for yourself the manner in which they paid me.'

I was commiserating with my honest gentleman over the double misfortune which had befallen him when he proposed that we should make a start.

'Thanks to your attentions, I feel somewhat recovered,' said Dalville. 'It will soon be dark. Let

us make for a hostelry I know of about two leagues distant. From there, with horses we can get in the morning, perhaps we might be able to reach home by evening.’

Fully determined to take advantage of the helping hand which Heaven seemed to have extended to me, I helped Dalville to get to his feet and start walking. I gave him my support along the way and, carefully avoiding all known roads, we proceeded as the crow flies towards the Alps along small side-tracks. We found the hostelry of which Dalville had spoken about two leagues further on and ate a decent dinner there in good spirits. When the meal was over, he commended me to the mistress of the hostelry who let me sleep in her bed and in the morning, mounted on two hired mules and accompanied on foot by one of the inn’s stable-lads, we reached the border of Dauphiné, still set on our course for the mountains. Dalville, having received a thorough drubbing, was incapable of completing the journey without interruption and I was not sorry for this on my own account for, little used to this mode of travel, I was no less discomfited than he. We halted at Virieu where I was shown the same honest attentions by my protector, and the next morning we went on our way again, still heading in the same direction. At about four o’clock in the afternoon, we reached the foot of the mountains. Our way now becoming virtually impassable, Dalville ordered the stable-boy to stay close by me for fear of accidents and we picked our way through the gorges. Constantly turning and climbing, we made no more than four leagues, by which time we had left all human habitation and frequented roads so far behind us that I believed I had got to the end of the world. Despite myself, I was gripped by a slight feeling of unease. As I strayed further into this inaccessible rocky fastness, I was reminded of the twisting paths of the forest surrounding the monastery of Sainte-Marie-des-Bois, and the dislike I had conceived of all solitary places made me shudder at my present environs. At last, we saw a château teetering on the very edge of an awesome precipice. It seemed to hang suspended atop a sheer rock face and looked more like the lair of ghostly spirits than a dwelling-place intended for humankind. We could see the chateau but no visible path that led up to it. The track we were following, used only by goats and littered with stones, took us there, however, though in an endless upward spiral. ‘That is where I live,’ said Dalville when he judged I had seen the château, and on my expressing my surprise at his living in such an out of the way place, he replied with extreme tartness that one lived where one could. I was as much shocked as frightened by his tone. Nothing escapes our attention when misfortune threatens, and the slightest inflexion of the voice of those on whose mercies we depend will strangle or revive our hopes. But since it was now too late to go back, I gave no outward sign of any misgivings. At length, after we had ridden round and round the ancient pile, it suddenly loomed up before us. Dalville got down from his mule and bidding me do likewise returned them both to the stable-lad, paid him, and ordered him to return whence he came—another piece of business which I found exceeding distasteful. Dalville noticed my unease.

‘What is it, Sophie?’ said he, as we walked towards his house. ‘You have not left France. My château is on the borders of Dauphiné, but is still on French territory.’

‘That may be so, sir,’ I replied, ‘but whatever made you decide to settle in such a bandits’ lair?’

‘It’s no bandits’ lair,’ said Dalville, glancing slyly at me as we proceeded. ‘It is not quite the lair of bandits, my dear, but neither is it a place where very honest folk live.’

‘O sir,’ I replied, ‘you are frightening me. Where are you taking me?’

‘I am taking you, whore, where you will be set to work for coiners,<sup>3</sup> said Dalville and, seizing me by the arm, he dragged me by force across a drawbridge which, being let down at our

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<sup>3</sup> Counterfeiting the coin of the realm was a capital offence.



approach, was now immediately raised once we were inside. 'Here you are,' he added when we reached the courtyard. 'Do you see this well?' he went on, pointing to a wide-mouthed, deep pit close by the gate where two naked women in chains were turning the wheel which raised the water which flowed into a storage cistern. 'These are your companions and this your task. You will toil twelve hours each day keeping the wheel turning and, like your companions, you will be duly and roundly beaten each time you slacken your efforts. In return, you will be allowed six ounces of black bread and a dish of beans each day. As to freedom, give up all thought of it, for you will never see the sky above your head again. You will die in harness and be thrown down that shaft which you see next to the well, to join the thirty or forty who are there already, and then you will be replaced by another like you.'

'Just Heaven, sir,' I cried, throwing myself at Dalville's feet. 'Be so good as to recall that I saved your life, that being momentarily moved by gratitude you appeared bent on making me happy, and that my rightful expectation was not to be reduced to this.'

'What do you mean, pray, by this sense of "gratitude" with which you imagine you hold me fast?' said Dalville. 'Come, you must think straighter, you witless creature. What exactly did you do when you came to my aid? You had the choice of continuing on your way or of helping me, and you chose the latter because your heart prompted you to do so. Which means that you did what gave you pleasure. Now how the devil can you say I should be under any obligation to reward you for giving yourself pleasure? How can it enter your head to imagine that a man such as myself, rolling in gold and wealth, with an income of a million a year and ready to travel as far as Venice to enjoy what it can buy him, should ever allow himself to be indebted to a nobody such as you? Had you raised me from the dead, I should still owe you nothing since what you did was for your own benefit. To work, slave, to work! Know this: though civilization has upset the established order of Nature, it has nevertheless not deprived Nature of her rights. In the beginning, she created strong and weak, her intention being that the latter be eternally subordinate to the former as the lamb still is to the lion or the insect to the elephant. The adroitness and wit of humankind determined the relative positions of individuals, for soon it was not physical strength which decided rank but the strength a man acquired through wealth. The richest man was the strongest man, the poorest was the weakest. But in spite of this change in the manner by which an individual came by his power, the superiority of the strong over the weak remained fundamental to the laws of Nature, according to which it mattered not if the rope which secured the weak was held by a man who was rich or a man who was strong, or whether its coils weighed heaviest on the weakest or the poorest. Now this sense of gratitude on which you stake your claims on me, Sophie, is not recognized by Nature. It was never a part of her laws that the pleasure one person took in obliging another should be a reason for the recipient to abandon his rights over his benefactor. Are these sentiments in which you take such pride to be found among animals which are examples to us all? If I dominate you by my wealth or strength, is it natural that I should have to give up my rights because in helping me you either self-servingly got the satisfaction you wanted or else consciously set out to help yourself? But even if the helping hand were extended by one equal to another, the self-respect of a lofty soul would never permit itself to be debased by gratitude. The man who receives is always a man humiliated, and is not the humiliation he feels a sufficient return for the person who obliged him? Is it not balm to our pride to rise above our neighbour? Does the obliger need anything more? And if the obligation which humbles the pride of the obliged is burdensome to him, by what right shall he be bound to tolerate it? Why should I consent to be humiliated each time my benefactor looks at me? Ingratitude, far from being a vice, is therefore the virtue of proud souls as surely as charity is the

virtue merely of faint hearts. The slave talks of gratitude to his master because he stands in need of it, but the master, guided by his passions and by Nature, must yield only to what promotes his interest or flatters him. Oblige whomever you like if you find pleasure in it, but do not expect rewards for enjoying the experience.'

At these words, which Dalville gave me no time to answer, two underlings, acting upon his orders, seized me, stripped off my clothes, chained me to my companions, and put me to work alongside them that same evening, no opportunity being given me to rest after the wearisome journey I had made. I had been toiling at the loathsome wheel for less than a quarter of an hour when the full company of coiners, having ended their labours for the day, crowded round, with their leader at their head, and proceeded to inspect me. They all heaped sarcastic, rude remarks upon me on account of the mark of shame which, though innocent, I bore upon my hapless body. They drew close, feeling me roughly all over and casting aspersions spiced with pungent pleasantries upon everything which, despite myself, I exposed to their view. This painful scene being over, they retreated a few paces. Thereupon Dalville, picking up a horsewhip which was always conveniently kept nearby, struck me with it all over five or six times with all his strength.

'That, you slut, is what you will get,' said he as he applied the lash, 'each time you are unfortunate enough to fail in your duty. This time it was not for shirking, but just to give you an idea of how I deal with anyone who does shirk.'

Each stroke broke the skin and, never having felt such intense pain at the hands of either Bressac or the brutal friars, I shrieked and struggled against my chains. My contortions and my screams were a matter of great mirth for the monsters who looked on and I was given the cruel satisfaction of learning that if there are men who, whether moved by vengeance or by ignoble sensuality, can take pleasure from the pain of others, then there are others barbaric enough to enjoy the same delights for no other motive than to feel their power or indulge the most ghoulish curiosity. Man is thus naturally evil. He is only a whit less evil when driven by his passions as when he is not, and in both cases the ills which befall his fellows are like to make execrable sport for him.

Three dank pens, each separate from the other and all barred and bolted like prison cells, stood around the well. One of the men who had chained me showed me which was mine and I withdrew into it after first receiving from him the ration of water, beans, and bread which was intended for me. It was there that I was at last able to contemplate undisturbed the full horror of my plight. 'Is it possible,' thought I, 'that there are men barbaric enough to smother their feelings of gratitude and the virtue to which I for my part will gladly yield whenever the plight of some honest person furnishes me with an opportunity to feel it warm within me? Can virtue then be so little esteemed by men? And can the man who smothers it with so much inhumanity be anything other than a monster?' My mind was occupied with these reflections which I watered with my tears, when suddenly the door of my cell was flung open: it was Dalville. Without a word, without uttering a sound, he set down the candle which had lit his way, leaped upon me like a savage beast, forced me to submit to his desires, using his fists to repulse the resistance I tried to put up against him and scornfully brushing aside the protests which sprang from my wits, took his brutal pleasure, picked up his glim, went out and bolted the door. 'O mercy!' thought I, 'is it possible that indecency could ever be carried further than this? What difference can there be between a man such as this and the least savage creature of the forest?'

The sun came up before I had enjoyed a single instant's repose. Our cells were opened, we were chained once more, and we resumed our grim task. My companions were both aged between 25 and 30 years. Although they had been drained by wretchedness and crippled by

physical overwork, they still exhibited a few remnants of their beauty; their figures were handsome and their waists small and one of the two still had magnificent hair. A dismal conversation with them informed me that both, at different times, were former mistresses of Dalville, one in Lyons and the other in Grenoble; that he had brought them to this hideous place where they had lived on the same footing with him for a few years; and that to reward them for pleasures they had afforded him, he had sentenced both to this humiliating drudgery. From them, I further learned that he currently had a charming mistress but that she, more fortunate than they, would in all likelihood follow him to Venice, where he was then about to go, if the considerable coinage which he had lately shipped to Spain resulted in his getting the letters of change he was waiting for before embarking on his Italian venture, since he did not wish to travel with his counterfeit gold to Venice. He never sent any there; it was always to his agents in countries other than the one he was shortly to visit that he expedited his false coin. As he never as a consequence had any money in the place where he wished to stay except for paper wealth drawn upon a different nation, his operations could never be found out and his fortune remained upon solid ground. But the structure might come crashing about his ears at any moment and the decampment he was planning was entirely dependent upon the success of this latest negotiation in which the larger part of his funds was engaged. If Cadiz accepted his piastres and louis d'or and in return sent him unimpeachable bills drawn on Venice, he would be set up for the rest of his life. But if his knavery were discovered, then he stood in danger of being denounced and hanged as he deserved. 'Alas!' said I on learning these particulars, 'Providence must for once be just. It will not permit a monster like this to succeed and we shall all three of us be revenged.' At noon, we were given two hours rest which we used, each going her separate way, to catch our breath and eat in our cells. At two, we were chained again and forced to turn the wheel until nightfall. We were never permitted to go inside the chateau. The reason for our being kept naked for five months of the year was the unbearable heat and the excessive work which we did, but also (as my companions assured me) so that we were more vulnerable to the beatings which our fierce master administered from time to time. In winter, we were given trousers and a waistcoat which fitted like a second skin, a type of garment which, enclosing us pretty tightly, similarly made our bodies easy of access to the beatings of our tormentor. Dalville did not make an appearance on that first day, but about midnight he repeated what he had done the night preceding. I tried to use the occasion to entreat him to mitigate my fate.

'And by what right do you ask this?' said the barbarian. 'Because I care to indulge a whim with you? Am I then to kneel down and beg your favour which, when granted, would entitle you to ask for something in return? I ask nothing of you: I take. I do not see that because I exercise a right over you once it must necessarily follow that I should therefore abstain from doing so twice. There is no love in what I do. Love is a sentiment which was ever a stranger to my heart. I make use of a woman out of necessity, just as a man might use a pisspot for another kind of need. But I never bestow upon her, subject as she is to my money and my authority, either esteem or affection and, owing what I take solely to my own efforts and requiring nothing from her but submission, I fail to see why, given all this, I should have to show her any gratitude. Such would be tantamount to saying that the thief who robs a man of his purse in a wood because he is the stronger, should show his gratitude for the wrong he has done him. The same holds true for a violence performed upon a woman: it may entitle a man to repeat the violation but can never be an adequate reason why he should grant her any form of compensation.'

So saying, Dalville, having taken his pleasure, quitted me abruptly and left me deep in further thoughts which, as you might imagine, were not to his credit. In the evening, he came to watch

us at work and finding that we had not supplied the regular daily quantity of water, he took down his cruel horsewhip and beat all three of us bloody. This did not prevent his coming to me that night (though I had been as little spared as the others) and behaving towards me as he had on the previous night. I showed him the weals he had raised on me and was bold enough again to remind him of the time I tore my shift to bind his wounds. But, preoccupied with his pleasure, the only answer Dalville gave my recriminations was a dozen cuffs interspersed with divers curses, and the moment he was satisfied he simply got up and went out as was his wont. This state of affairs lasted a month, after which time I at least obtained from my tormentor the relief of not being exposed at night to the dreadful anguish of seeing him take what he was so unworthy to have. Yet my life did not change one whit. I received neither more nor less kindness nor was I treated more or less harshly than before.

A year went by and still I was in this cruel pass when news finally spread throughout the house that not only was Dalville's fortune made and not only was he now in receipt of the vast sums in paper bills for Venice which he had wanted, but he had been asked to supply several further millions in false coin, payment for which would be made in the form of whatever bills drawn on Venice he cared to ask for. The villain could not possibly have made a larger and more unexpected fortune: when he left, he would have an annual revenue of more than a million, and that was to reckon without his further expectations. Such was the latest example which Providence thrust before me, such her freshest manner of seeking to persuade me that prosperity was the wages of crime and misfortune the reward of virtue.

Dalville made ready to leave but on the eve came to me at midnight, though he had not done so in a very long time. It was he himself who told me about his fortune and announced his imminent departure. I threw myself at his feet and beseeched him in the most earnest terms to restore me to liberty and to furnish me with as little money as he thought fit to see me to Grenoble.

'When you got to Grenoble, you would denounce me.'

'O sir,' I said, leaving his knees moist with my tears, 'Then I give you my oath that I shall never set foot there. But to make you quite easy on this score, there is something you could do: take me with you to Venice. Perhaps there I should find hearts less hard than they are in my own country, and if you were to carry me hence, I swear on everything I hold most sacred that I should never bother you again.'

'You will get no help and no money from me,' the arch-blackguard replied harshly. 'Anything which sayours of alms or charity is so repugnant to my character that had I three times the gold I presently have, I still should not give a farthing to a beggar-man. I have considered principles on this question and I shall never stray from them. The poor man is part of the natural order. By creating men unequal in strength, Nature has clearly shown us her wish that inequality be preserved, even though civilization should alter natural laws. The poor have replaced the weak, as I have already explained. To ease their plight would mean overturning the established order, opposing the natural order, and destroying the balance which underpins Nature's sublime arrangement of things. It would mean striving for equality which would be fatal to society and encouraging idleness and sloth. It would teach the poor to pick the pocket of any rich man who chose not to give them charity, a lesson the more easily learnt from the habit they would acquire of expecting to have money without working for it.'

'O sir! How harsh your principles are! Would you say the same things if you had not always been rich?'

'I was not always rich, far from it. But I got the better of fate. I stamped on the mirage of

virtue which invariably leads a man to gaol or the hangman's noose. I realized very early on that religion, philanthropy, and charity were sure stumbling-blocks placed in the path of anyone who aspired to wealth and success and I have built my fortune on the ruins of human misconceptions. It was by mocking the laws of God and man, running roughshod over the weak who barred my way, abusing the good faith and gullibility of other people, and ruining the poor and robbing the rich that I have made my steep way up to the temple of the god to whom I kneeled. Why did you not do likewise? Your fortune was in your own hands to make. Has the imaginary virtue which you chose instead consoled you for the sacrifices which you have made in its name? But it is too late, you miserable creature, too late. Shed tears for your mistakes, suffer and, if you can, try and find in your cherished illusions those things which your gullibility has prevented you from enjoying.'

With these last cruel words, Dalville leaped upon me. But he was now so odious to me and his atrocious ideas inspired such hatred in my heart that I fought him off roughly. He attempted to use force but did not succeed. He made good his defeat with cruelties: I was beaten almost senseless but still victory was denied him. His fires, having burned to no purpose, died down and the tears shed by the rabid wretch, which were quite wasted on me, were my revenge at last for the outrages he had committed against me.

Before setting out the next day, the blackguard subjected us to a fresh scene of cruelty and barbarity of which there is no equal in the annals of the Andronici or the reigns of Nero, Tiberius, and Wenceslas. It was generally believed that his mistress was to go with him and he had bade her deck herself out accordingly. But when he was about to mount his horse, he brought her to where we were.

'Here is your billet, you vile minx,' he barked at her, and thereupon ordered her to strip to the skin. 'I should like my comrades to have something to remember me by, and so, as a token of my esteem, I shall leave them the woman they believe I am most fond of. But since only three are needed here and since I am about to set out on a dangerous road where my weapons will prove their worth, I shall try out my pistols on one of you.'

So saying, he cocked one, aimed it at the breast of each of us as we turned the wheel and finally, turning to one of his former mistresses:

'Go,' said he, blowing her brains out, 'go and tell news of me in the other world! Go tell the Devil that it is Dalville, the richest rogue on earth, who thus defies both his hand and the hand of Heaven with such insolence!'

His hapless victim had not been killed outright and struggled for some time in her chains. It was a horrid sight and the vile monster feasted his eyes on it with intense delight. In the end, he ordered the chains to be taken off her and put on to his mistress. He insisted on watching her push the wheel around three or four times and on personally administering a dozen lashes with the horsewhip. Then, when these barbaric acts were over, the fiend got on his horse and, accompanied by two men, rode out of our sight for ever.

The day after Dalville went away, everything became different. His successor, a mild, right-thinking man, ordered our immediate release.

'This is no fit employment for the gentle, weaker sex,' he told us kindly, 'but the work of animals to serve the wheel. The business on which we are engaged is already crime enough. We should not outrage the Supreme Being further with gratuitous acts of cruelty.'

He installed us in the château, disinterestedly reinstated Dalville's mistress to all the domestic functions of which she previously had charge, and employed my companion and myself in the workshop where we stamped out the coins—a much less tiring occupation certainly and one for

which we were recompensed with very good rooms to sleep in and excellent eating. After a space of two months, Dalville's successor, who was named Roland, informed us of the safe arrival of his colleague at Venice. He had settled there, had turned his bills into money, and was enjoying his prosperity exactly as he had flattered himself he would.

The fate of his successor was very different. The luckless Roland was an honest man: it took no more than this for him to be promptly crushed. One day, when all was quiet in the château and, ruled by the laws of this good master, we were busying ourselves with our work which, though criminal, was easy and agreeable, the walls suddenly came under siege. Denied entry by the drawbridge, the attackers clambered across the moat and, before those inside had time even to think of defending themselves, the place was overrun by more than a hundred mounted officers of the constabulary. There was no course but surrender. We were chained together like animals, shackled and set upon the backs of horses, and carried off to Grenoble. 'O Heaven!' said I, as we arrived, 'here at last is the town where I was foolish enough to think that happiness would begin for me!' The trial of the coiners soon came to a judgement: all were sentenced to hang. The mark I bore being observed, my judges scarcely troubled to question me, and I was about to be sentenced along with the others when I spoke up in the hope of at last attracting a measure of compassion from the celebrated magistrate who was a credit to the bench: an upright judge, respected citizen, and enlightened philosopher, his celebrated and glorious name will be carved in the temple of Memory by his charity and humanity. He heard me out, but more, being won over to my good faith and to the truth of my tale of misfortune, he condescended to give me the comfort of his tears. O worthy man! I owe you a homage of respect: grant my heart leave to give you this mark of my esteem. You will not find the gratitude of an unfortunate woman heavy to bear and the tribute she offers in honour of your great and noble heart will ever give hers its sweetest felicity. Monsieur S. became my personal advocate, my griefs were heard, my groans found homes in kindly souls, and my tears flowed over hearts which, not being made of flint towards me, were further softened by his generous pleading. The general statements sworn by the criminals who were to be executed, being favourable to my cause, buttressed the zeal of this man who had taken it up. I was held to have been abducted and was declared innocent. My name was cleared, the charges against me were dropped, and I was unconditionally discharged, free once more to decide my own fate. To these services, my protector added the raising of a subscription for me which brought near to a hundred pistoles to my profit. It was at last a glimpse of happiness, my best hopes seemed about to be realized, and I believed I had reached the end of my misfortunes, when it pleased Providence to teach me that I still had a long road to travel.

On leaving prison, I had taken a room at an inn opposite the bridge over the river Isère where I had been assured that I should be respectably lodged. Following the advice given to me by Monsieur S., my intention was to remain there a while and make shift to find myself a position in the town or, if I did not succeed in this, to go back to Lyons armed with letters of recommendation with which he would be kind enough to furnish me. I was eating what is called the set dinner at the inn when, on the second day, I perceived that I was being closely watched by a stout, very well dressed woman who went about under the title of Baroness. Examining her in my turn, I fancied I recognized her. Each of us stepping forward to greet the other, we embraced like two people who have met but cannot remember where. Then, taking me to one side, the ample Baroness said: 'Sophie! Surely I am not mistaken! Are you not the Sophie I rescued ten years ago from the Palace prison. Do you not know your Dubois?'

Scarcely comforted by this discovery, I nevertheless gave her a civil answer. But I was dealing

with the cleverest, most cunning woman in France and I could not escape her. Dubois said the kindest, most courteous things and told me that like the rest of the town she had followed my case with interest, though she had not known that I had been the object of it. With my customary weakness, I allowed myself to be led to her chamber and there recounted my misfortunes to her.

‘O my dear,’ she said, embracing me again, ‘if I wanted to have a quiet word with you in private, it was to tell you that I have made my fortune and that everything I possess is now yours to dispose of. Look here,’ she said, and she opened caskets filled with gold and diamonds. ‘This is the fruit of my industry. But had I, like you, worshipped virtue, I should have been hanged long ago or left to rot in gaol.’

‘O Madame,’ said I, ‘if you owe these riches to crime alone, then Providence, which never fails to be just at the last, will not allow you to enjoy them for long.’

‘You are mistaken,’ Dubois said. ‘Do not think that Providence always favours the virtuous. Take care lest a passing moment of prosperity should fill up your head with such misleading notions. It is a matter of indifference to the continued working of the laws of Providence if one man leads a life of vice while another treads the path of virtue. Providence requires equal quantities of vice and virtue, and the individual who practises either the one or the other is the smallest item in its calculations. Listen to me, Sophie, and listen well. You have wit and sense and I should like to see you come round finally to this view. It is not the choice which a man makes between vice or virtue, my dear, which enables him to be happy, since vice, like virtue, is simply a manner of behaving towards others. It is therefore not a matter of following one rather than the other but simply of how one makes one’s way along the common path. He who strays from that path is always in the wrong. In a wholly virtuous world, I should advise you to follow virtue since, all rewards being related to its practice, your happiness would be inextricably dependent upon it. And in a wholly corrupt world, I should never advise anything except the pursuit of vice. Whoever does not tread the path taken by others will surely perish, for every obstacle which bars his way will stub his foot and, since he is always the weaker of the two forces, it follows necessarily that he will come off the worse in the encounter. In vain do civil laws seek to restore order and return mankind to virtue: being too corrupt to undertake the task and too weak to bring it off, they may make men momentarily turn their backs on the common highway but will never make them wander off it for good. When the general interest of people prompts them to do evil, it follows that he who will not be corrupted along with the rest must perforce rise up against the general interest. Now what happiness can a man expect if he is perpetually at odds with the interest of others? You will say that it is vice which is hostile to the interest of men and this I should concede in a world where the vicious are equal in number to the virtuous, since in such a world the interest of the one clashes noisily with the interest of the other. But such is far from true in a society which is utterly corrupt, for there my vices, harming only the man who is vicious (there being only such), would turn his mind to other vices which would compensate him for his losses, and he and I would both be happy. There would result a general effervescence, a multiplicity of conflicts and mutually inflicted wounds, in which each person, now making good what he lost the moment before, constantly finds that he has regained the winning hand. If vice is a danger only to virtue, it is because virtue is too weak-kneed and timid to take the initiative. But if virtue be banished from the face of the earth, then vice, harming only those who are vicious, will cease to be bothersome: it will hatch further vices but will not taint virtue. “Ah,” you say, “but what of the beneficial effects of virtue?” This too is a sophism: in reality, these “beneficial effects” benefit only the weak and do not profit the man whose energies make him self-sufficient, whose resourcefulness is all he requires to correct the

vagaries of fate. What can you have expected all your life other than to fail, my dear, since you always chose to go in the opposite direction to everybody else? If you had decided to swim with the current, you would have reached a safe haven as I have. Does the man who journeys up a river arrive at his destination as quickly as the man who travels down it? The first goes against Nature and the second drifts with it. You speak much to me of Providence, but what proof do you have that Providence loves order and therefore virtue? Has it not given you enough examples of its inherent unfairness and arbitrariness? Is it by visiting upon mankind war, pestilence, and famine, is it by creating a universe which is vicious in every respect, that Providence, in your eyes, makes manifest its extreme love of virtue? And why should you think that vicious persons should incur its displeasure since Providence itself operates strictly through vice, both its will and its works being nothing but wickedness and corruption, crime and chaos? In any case, whence comes the impulse which leads us to do evil? Is it not implanted in us by the hand of Providence? Is there a single wish or sensation which does not come to us from the same source? Is it therefore reasonable to argue that Providence would allow us keep, or give us a taste for anything which would not further its designs? If therefore vices serve the purposes of Providence, why should we want to combat them, by what right should we strive for their destruction, and why should we turn a deaf ear to them? If the world were a little more philosophical, everything would soon be in its rightful place again, and legislators and governors would see that the vices which they denounce and punish so sternly can sometimes be much more useful than the virtues which they preach but never reward.'

'But even were I weak enough, Madame, to adopt your wicked doctrine,' I answered my corruptress, 'how would you silence the remorse which it would constantly breed in my heart?'

'Remorse is an illusion, Sophie,' Dubois went on. 'It is nothing but the witless grumbling of minds too weak to dare to stop its voice.'

'But can its voice be stopped?'

'There is nothing easier, for we repent only those things which we are not in the habit of doing. If you repeat over and over the actions which make you feel remorseful, you would quickly put out their fire. Raise the torch of passion against them, vent on them the irresistible laws of self-interest, and you will discover that they evaporate like the morning mist. Remorse is not the infallible test of crime: it is no more than the badge of a mind which is easily enslaved. If some nonsensical order were to be given which forbade you to leave this room, then however convinced you were that you would be doing no wrong by doing so, you would not go through the door without a feeling of guilt. So it is quite untrue that only criminal actions give rise to remorse. If you could bring yourself to see how meaningless crime is, or how necessary crimes are to Nature's overall scheme of things, it would be as easy for you to overcome remorse as it would be to commit criminal acts—just as easy, in fact, as it would be for you to silence the remorse which would follow your quitting this room in contravention of the illegal order you had received to stay in it. We must begin by analysing exactly what men call "crime", starting from the conviction that what they describe as such is nothing more than a want of respect for the laws and manners of their nation; that what is called crime in France ceases to be criminal a hundred leagues beyond its borders; that in practice there is no action which is universally considered to be a crime; that in consequence there is in rational terms nothing which truly warrants the name of crime; and that the whole question is no more than a matter of opinion and geography. Given this, you will see how absurd it is to submit to practising virtues which pass for vices elsewhere, and to avoid committing crimes which under other skies are thought to be good actions. I ask you: is it possible that these conclusions, reached after mature reflection, would still breed



remorse in the heart of a man who on French soil, whether for his pleasure or out of self-interest, commits an act of Chinese or Japanese virtue which would, however, incur the law's displeasure in his native land? Would he be stopped in his course by this fanciful hair-splitting? And would it have sufficient sway over him to make him feel remorse if he had something of a philosophical cast of mind? Now remorse is merely a function of a prohibition. It arises as an effect of the violation of a prohibition and not as an effect of an action: is it a wise feeling which we should allow to persist in us, or should we not do better to strangle it at birth? Let us rather acquire the habit of thinking of actions which make us remorseful as being neutral; let us judge them in the light of a serious study of the manners and customs of all the nations of the world; and then, having looked at them in this way, let us commit those actions again, whatever they may be, as often as we can. Then should we see the torch of reason put an end to remorse and dispel the gloomy mind-workings which are but the product of ignorance, cowardice, and education. For thirty years, Sophie, an unending train of vices and crimes has been leading me step by step along the road to this brink of fortune where I now stand: two or three more successful tilts and I shall have risen out of the condition of poverty and beggaredom in which I was born to an estate worth 50,000 livres a year. Do you imagine that throughout my brilliant career I ever once felt the prick of remorse? You must not think so, for I never did. Even if at this stage in the game some dreadful calamity were to cast me from my pinnacle into the abyss, I still should not give remorse houseroom. I should blame other people or my own want of skill, but I should remain at peace with my conscience.

'That may be,' said I, 'but pray allow me to dwell a moment on the philosophical principles you have invoked. By what right do you insist that my conscience should be as firm as yours, for mine has not been accustomed from childhood to overcome the same scruples as you have? On what grounds do you say that my mind, which does not work like yours, can adapt to your way of thinking? You admit that there is a finite quantity of good and evil in Nature and that it follows therefore that there must be a certain number of people who do good and another category of persons who do evil. The policy which I have chosen is, by your own principles, natural. You cannot therefore ask me to depart from the laws which Nature prescribes for me. Furthermore, since you say you have found happiness in the career which you have followed, I should in my turn find it equally impossible to meet with felicity by departing from the course on which I am embarked. Nor should you think that the vigilance of the law will allow law-breakers to go on their way untroubled for long. Have you not just seen an example of its working for yourself? Out of fifteen wicked men whose company I was unfortunate enough to keep, fourteen have died shameful deaths.'

'Is that what you call misfortune? Tell me: how much does shame matter to a man who has abandoned all principles? When the final ditch has been crossed, when honour is no more than a quaint fancy; reputation a will-o'-the-wisp and the future a bubble, does it matter whether a man dies on the scaffold or in his bed? There are two kinds of wicked men in the world: those whom great wealth and prodigious influence put beyond the reach of so tragic an end, and those who, if apprehended, will not avoid it. The latter kind, born with nothing, if they have any wit at all, can have only two prospects in view: either Wealth or the Wheel. If they succeed in acquiring the first, they have achieved their object; if they meet only with the second, what regrets can they have since they had nothing to lose? The law thus has no power over any wicked man. It cannot touch the scoundrel who has become powerful, for the successful rogue can always avoid its grasp, while the unsuccessful villain, who can expect nothing else from the sword of justice, can have no cause to fear it.'

‘Ah! But do you not then believe that in the next world heavenly justice lies in wait for the man who has not feared to lead a life of crime in this?’

‘I think that if there were a God, there would be less evil on this earth. I believe that if evil exists here below, then either it was willed by God or it was beyond His powers to prevent it. Now I cannot bring myself to fear a God who is either spiteful or weak. I defy Him without fear and care not a fig for His thunderbolts.’

‘You perturb me greatly, Madame,’ said I, getting to my feet. ‘You will forgive me if I listen no more to your execrable sophisms and odious blasphemies.’

‘Hold hard, Sophie. If I cannot convince your reason, then let me at least try to win over your heart. I need your help: do not refuse me. See, I have a hundred louis here. I put them to one side, so, as you may observe: they will be yours once the business has been successfully concluded.’

Giving expression now only to my natural inclination to do good, I immediately asked Dubois what business she meant, so that I might do all in my power to prevent the crime which she was preparing to commit.

‘This is the way of it,’ said she. ‘Have you remarked the young merchant from Lyons who has been dining with us downstairs for the last three days?’

‘You mean Dubreuil?’

‘The very same.’

‘Well?’

‘He is in love with you. He told me so. He has 600,000 francs in gold and paper which he keeps in a little casket next to his bed. Let me give him the idea that you would be agreeable to hearing his suit. Whether this is the case or not cannot matter to you. I shall suggest that he invites you to drive out into the country with him. I shall let him think that he will advance his cause during the drive. You will keep him amused and ensure that he stays out for as long as possible. Meanwhile, I shall be robbing him. I shall not run away, however: I shall still be here in Grenoble when his goods will be safely in Turin. We shall use all our ingenuity to prevent his suspecting us. We shall give every appearance of helping him with his enquiries. Then I shall announce my departure which will not arouse his suspicions, you will follow, and the hundred louis will be made over to you when we both arrive safely in Piedmont.’

‘Very well, Madame,’ I told Dubois, quite resolved to warn the hapless Dubreuil of the callous trick which was to be played on him. And the better to deceive the jade, I added: ‘But pray reflect, Madame, that if Dubreuil is in love with me, I could, by warning him or by selling him my favours, earn much more than the paltry sum which you are offering me to betray him.’

‘True, true,’ said Dubois. ‘Indeed, I begin to think that Heaven has given greater talents for crime to you than to me. If that is the way of it,’ she went on, writing a paper, ‘here is my note for a thousand louis. See if you dare refuse me now!’

‘I should never dream of any such thing, Madame,’ said I, taking the note from her. ‘But at least seek no explanation for my weakness and my wrong in accommodating your request, other than in my unhappy circumstances.’

‘I thought I could give you credit for showing some wit,’ said Dubois, ‘but you would rather have me put the blame on your poverty. As you wish. But serve me always and you will be content.’

The plot was arranged. That same evening, I began to be a little less unyielding with regard to Dubreuil and noticed that he did indeed feel something for me.

My position was exceeding delicate. Of course, I should have been utterly opposed to being a party in the proposed crime even had there been three times the money to be got from it. But I

had no stomach whatsoever for consigning to the gallows a woman to whom, ten years before, I had owed my freedom. I wished to prevent the crime without exposing it, and with anyone but a consummate scoundrel like Dubois, I should assuredly have succeeded. Such is what I resolved to do, quite unaware that the veiled manipulations of this abominable creature would not only undermine the entire structure of my honourable scheme but would bring a punishment on my head for having conceived it.

On the day appointed for the planned excursion, Dubois invited both of us to dine in her chamber. We accepted and, when the meal was over, Dubreuil and I went down to urge haste to be made with the carriage which was being got ready for us. Dubois did not go down with us and I found myself for a moment alone with Dubreuil before we climbed on board.

‘Sir,’ said I quickly. ‘Listen to me carefully. Show no reaction and above all carry out exactly what I tell you. Do you have a friend staying at this inn on whom you can count absolutely?’

‘Yes, a junior partner of mine. I trust him as I should trust myself.’

‘Well, sir, you must go to him promptly and instruct him not to leave your chamber for a single instant for the whole of the time we shall be out driving.’

‘But I have the key to my chamber here in my pocket. What is the meaning of this extreme precaution?’

‘It is more important than you think, sir. Pray see to it, else I shall not drive out with you. The woman we have just left is a thief. She has only arranged the excursion we are about to embark upon together so that she may rob you undisturbed while we are out. Please hurry, sir, for she is watching us. She is very dangerous. It must not appear that I am giving you a warning. Give your key to your friend, urge him to keep to your chamber in the company of a few others if he can arrange it, and order the garrison not to stir out until we return. I shall explain the rest when we are in the carriage.’

Dubreuil heard me out, took my hand to thank me, and rushed away to give orders according to my recommendations. He returned, we set off and, as we drove, I revealed the whole plot to him. The young man expressed, in the most fulsome terms, his gratitude for the service which I had rendered him and then, begging me to tell him the full truth of my current situation, he declared that nothing in my account of my adventures revolted him sufficiently to prevent his making me the offer of his hand and his fortune.

‘We both come of the same class,’ Dubreuil said. ‘My father was a merchant like yours, my affairs have prospered while yours have not. I am only too happy to be able to right the wrongs which Fortune has done you. Think, Sophie, I am my own master, I answer to no one, I am on my way to Geneva to make an excellent investment of the money which your kind intervention has prevented me losing. You will follow me there. When you arrive I shall become your husband and you will not reappear in Lyons except as my wife.’

This turn of events was altogether too flattering to my hopes for me to dare refuse. Nevertheless I felt that I could not accept without making Dubreuil understand quite clearly all the circumstances which might lead him to regret his having asked. He was grateful for my niceness of sentiment but only pressed me the harder . . . O hapless creature that I was, was it ever to be that happiness was held out to me only to make me feel more keenly the bitter pain of never being able to grasp it? Was it an inescapable arrangement of the decrees of Providence that no virtue should ever burgeon in my heart but that it should tip me over into misfortune? Our conversation had already taken us two leagues from the town and we were about to step out of the carriage to enjoy the cool of the riverside walks which border the Isère where it was our intention to stroll, when all at once Dubreuil said that he felt terribly ill. He got down from the

coach and was instantly attacked by the most dreadful retching. I ordered him to be put back in the carriage and we flew back in haste to Grenoble. Dubreuil was so ill that he had to be carried to his room. His condition amazed his friends who, following his orders, had not stirred from his apartment. I did not leave his side. A leech arrived and, just Heaven, the unfortunate young man's state was diagnosed: he had been poisoned! The moment I heard this ghastly news, I ran to Dubois's apartment. The wicked woman was gone! I hurried to my chamber where I found my clothes box broken into, the little money and all the clothes I owned all spirited off and Dubois, I was told, departed post-haste three hours since in the direction of Turin . . . There was no doubt that she was the author of all these crimes. Presenting herself at Dubreuil's door and vexed to find people in it, she had taken her revenge upon me. She had poisoned Dubreuil during dinner so that, on his returning to find she had succeeded in robbing him, the luckless young man, more concerned to save his life than to pursue her, would leave her to flee in safety, but also to ensure that the accident of his death occurring so to speak in my arms, I should be more like to be suspected than she. I ran back to Dubreuil's chamber but was not allowed to go near him: surrounded by his friends, he was expiring, but also exonerating me, assuring them I was innocent and forbidding them to bring charges. He had scarcely closed his eyes when his partner ran out to bring me the news and declared that I was to set my mind at rest. Alas, how could I? Was I not to weep bitter tears for the only man who, from the time when I first knew misfortune, had so generously proposed to rescue me from it? Was I not to lament a theft which returned me to the cruel pit of destitution out of which I seemed so incapable of climbing? I told Dubreuil's partner everything, not only what had been plotted against his friend but also what had happened to me. He pitied me, grieved bitterly for his partner, and reproved me for the excessive delicacy which had prevented my reporting the facts the moment I had learned of Dubois's scheme. We calculated that the abominable woman, who needed only four hours to see her safely to another country, would be there long before we could take steps to have her pursued; that it would be an expensive business; and that the innkeeper, closely implicated by the information I should lay before the justices, would defend himself vigorously and in the process might perhaps be the ruin of a person, namely myself, who, so it seemed, was still alive in Grenoble only because she had already survived one criminal trial, and was apparently able to subsist only on the strength of public charity. This reasoning seemed quite conclusive to me and, more, it filled me with such fear that I resolved to quit the town without taking formal leave of my protector. Monsieur S. Dubreuil's friend applauded my decision. He did not disguise from me that if the incident were to attract attention, then whatever precautions he took, I should be compromised by the depositions which he would be obliged to make, partly because of my connection with Dubois and partly because I had been with his friend on that last drive. Bearing all this in mind, he repeated his urgent advice that I should leave Grenoble at once without seeing anyone, and assured me that in the mean time I could count absolutely on his never acting in any way whatsoever which was contrary to my interests. Left alone to meditate on the whole affair, I saw that the young man's advice was all the sounder when I reflected that it was as clear that I appeared to be guilty as it was certain that I was not, and that the only aspect of the business which spoke spiritedly on my behalf—viz., my warning to Dubreuil, which he had perhaps explained none too clearly on his death-bed—would not be such convincing evidence that I should count absolutely on it. In the light of all this, I made up my mind quickly. I informed Dubreuil's partner what I had resolved.

'Would that my friend had charged me,' said he, 'with making some advantageous provision for you, for I should have attended to the business with the best of wills. And I wish heartily,' he

added, 'that he had told me that it was to you that he owed the warning to mount a guard on his apartment while he went driving out with you. But he did none of these things. He merely said several times over that you were not guilty and that no charges should be brought against you. I am forced therefore to limit my role to the execution of his wishes. The losses which you say you have incurred through acting on his behalf are such that I should be tempted to do a little something extra for you myself, Mademoiselle, if I could. But I am just starting out in business, I am young and my resources are pretty slender. There is not a penny-piece of mine amongst Dubreuil's monies, and I must now return the entire sum to his family. Pray therefore, Sophie, understand if I restrict my services to the small gesture I shall now make. Here are 5 louis and here,' he added, ushering into his room a female I had glimpsed at the inn earlier, 'here is an honest woman of business from Châlon-surSaône which is my home town. She will return there after stopping for four and twenty hours in Lyons where she has affairs to settle.'

'Madame Bertrand,' said the young man as he introduced me to the woman, 'I earnestly recommend this young person to you. She would be happy to find a position in the provinces and I beg you, as punctually as though you did it for me, to use every possible effort to find her a place in our town consonant with her birth and education. She is to pay out no money until it is done. I shall settle with you when I see you next. Goodbye, Sophie. Madame Bertrand leaves tonight. Go with her and may a larger measure of happiness accompany you to a town where I may soon have the satisfaction of seeing you again and be better able to express the deep gratitude I shall feel all my life for your honest manner of proceeding towards Dubreuil.'

The good-heartedness of this young man, who at bottom owed me nothing, made me shed a few tears despite myself. I accepted his gifts and swore that I should work solely to achieve a station in which I should be able one day to repay him. 'Alas,' said I, on leaving him, 'though the practice of virtue has plunged me into misfortune once again, then at least, for the first time in my life, a glimmer of comfort has appeared in the ghastly pit of woe into which virtue continues still to propel me.' I never saw my young benefactor again and, in accordance with what had been resolved between us, set off with Madame Bertrand the night following the terrible fate which had overtaken Dubreuil.

Madame Bertrand travelled in a small covered carriage drawn by a single horse which we took turns to drive from inside. In the carriage she carried all her effects and a good round sum in cash, together with her little daughter of 18 months who was still suckling and of whom I was soon, to my cost, to be altogether as fond as the mother who had borne her.

Madame Bertrand was a kind of fish-wife, having neither education nor wit, suspicious, garrulous, gossipy, tiresome, narrow-minded and, as such, more or less indistinguishable from any woman of the common people. Each evening, we regularly carried her goods into inns and we slept in the same chamber. We reached Lyons without any new incident arising, but during the two days which the woman needed to attend to her business, I had a singular encounter in the town. I was strolling on the bank of the Rhône with one of the servants from the inn whom I had asked to go with me, when suddenly I saw walking towards me the Reverend Father Antonin, now Superior of the Recollets of that place, the despoiler of my virginity whom I had known, as you will recall, Madame, at the little monastery of Sainte-Marie-des-Bois where my evil star had led me.

Antonin came up to me in the most casual manner and, though the serving-girl was there, asked me if I would care to call on him in his new abode where we might resume the pleasures we had known before.

'But here is a buxom wench,' said he, alluding to the girl who was with me, 'who would be

very welcome too. In our abbey, there are a number of stout fellows more than capable of holding their own against a brace of pretty women.'

I blushed prodigiously at his words and for a moment attempted to make him believe that he was mistaken in thinking he knew me. But not succeeding, I tried by signs to persuade him at least to restrain himself in the presence of my guide. But nothing could check his impudent flow and his solicitations simply became all the more pressing. In the end, upon our refusing repeatedly to go off with him, he insisted upon knowing our addresses. To rid myself of his importunities, I immediately thought to give him a false one. He wrote it down in his notebook and left us, promising that he would surely see us again soon. We returned to the inn. On the way, I imparted as well as I could to the serving-girl who was with me the history of my unfortunate acquaintance with the man. But either she was not satisfied by my account or else, being as indiscreet as her female sort always are by nature, I judged by what Madame Bertrand later said after the sorry adventure which befell me in her company, that the chit had fully apprised her of my knowing the abominable friar. However, he did not come and we went our way. We left Lyons rather late and on that first day got no further than Villefranche. It was there, Madame, that I suffered the dreadful calamity which has led me to appear before you as a criminal—without my being any guiltier in this latest pass in my life than in any of the others in which you have observed me so unjustly smitten by the cruel blows of fate, and without there having been any reason for my being plunged into the pit of woes other than the charitable impulses which I was utterly unable to eradicate from my heart.

On arriving in Villefranche at about six o'clock on a February evening, my companion and I had made haste to sup and go up early to bed so that we should make a longer day of it on the morrow. We had been sleeping for under two hours when a frightful quantity of smoke filled our chamber and made us both wake with a start. We could not but doubt that there was fire raging close at hand. Just Heaven! The speed with which the flames were spreading was already only too alarming. Half-dressed, we opened our door, but all we heard around us was the roar of walls collapsing, the ghastly noise of roof-timbers giving way, and the hideous screams of poor wretches as they fell into the fire below. A tongue of devouring flame reached up towards us, leaving us hardly time enough to hurry out of our room. However, we managed to scramble through the door and found ourselves commingled with the crowd of sorry folk who, half-naked as we were and some half-scorched too, were seeking safety in flight. At that instant, I recalled that Madame Bertrand, more concerned for herself than for her daughter, had given no thought to preserving her from certain death. Without a word to her, I ran back into our chamber through flames which blinded my eyes and burned me on several parts of my body, seized the poor little thing, and sprang up intending to return her to her mother. Trusting to a beam which was already partly burned through, I lost my footing and my first instinct was to put my arms out in front of me. Thus prompted by Nature, I was obliged to let go the precious burden I carried and the hapless infant fell into the flames as her mother looked on. This abominable woman, not pausing to think either of the object of the action I had tried to take, which was to save her child, or of the state to which the child's falling while she watched had reduced me, and hysterical with grief, now accused me of killing her daughter, leaped wildly upon me, and attacked me with her fists. Meanwhile the fire abated and the multitude of helpers managed to save half the inn. Madame Bertrand's first thought was to return to her chamber, which was one of the least damaged of all. There she repeated her charges, saying that I ought to have let her daughter be, that no harm would have come to her. But she became quite beside herself when, searching about for her goods, she discovered that she had been comprehensively robbed! Then, heeding only her

despair and her anger, she screamed at me, accusing me of being the cause of the fire which I had started so that I could rob her more easily. She said she would report me, and straightway matching the threat to the deed, demanded to speak to the Justice of the place. In vain did I plead my innocence: she would not listen. The magistrate she had asked to see was not far away, having himself supervised the rescue work, and he appeared in answer to the summons of the loathsome woman. She stated her charge against me, shoring it up with anything that came into her head to give it greater force and legitimacy, and painted me in the colours of a common streetwalker who had escaped a hanging in Grenoble, as a baggage whom a young man, doubtless her lover, had given into her keeping against her better judgement, and she spoke too of the Recollet in Lyons. In short, nothing was omitted from the most emphatic performance which slander envenomed by grief and revenge could inspire. The judge received her statement and then the building was examined. It transpired that the fire had begun in a loft full of hay where several persons swore they had seen me go the previous evening, which was quite true. While looking for a water-closet to which I had been misdirected by the tavern servants whom I had asked, I had gone into this hay-loft and had remained there long enough to start a suspicion that I had done what I was accused of. And so my arraignment got under way, all the rules of procedure being strictly observed: the witnesses were all in agreement, nothing I alleged in my defence was even listened to, it was demonstrated that I was the arsonist, it was proved that I had accomplices who, while I busied myself here, were busying themselves committing thefts there, and, next morning at first light, without any further enquiry being made, I was taken back to Lyons, to the prison there, and was committed for arson, child-murder, and robbery.

Long grown accustomed to slander, injustice, and misfortune, and used since childhood to the idea that I never could yield to any virtuous impulse without being certain to find thorns somewhere in it, my affliction made me feel more bewildered than anguished, and I wept more than I bewailed my fate. However, it being natural for any suffering creature to grasp at every possible means by which he might climb out of the abyss into which misfortune has cast him, I thought of Father Antonin. However small the help I could hope for from that quarter, I did not reject out of hand my wish to see him and requested that he be fetched. Not knowing who could be asking for him, he came, but then affected not to recognize me. I told the gaoler that it was possible he could not place me because he had been my director of conscience only when I was very young, but on these grounds I requested a private interview with him. This was agreed by both parties. When I was alone with the friar, I threw myself at his feet and beseeched him to save me from the cruel pass I had come to. I proved my innocence to him and did nothing to disguise the fact that the crude suggestions he had made to me two days before had antagonized the person to whom I had been recommended, she now being my chief accuser. The friar listened to me very attentively and hardly had I finished my tale when he said:

‘Listen, Sophie, and do not fly into a passion as you usually do when anyone contradicts your cursed principles. You see where your notions have brought you, for now you have adequate leisure to convince yourself that they have served no purpose but to tip you into one abyss after another. So if you wish your neck to be saved, abandon them for once in your life. I can see only one way of managing it. One of the holy Brothers here in Lyons is a close relative of both the Governor and the King’s Intendant; I shall inform him of your plight. Say you are his niece and as such he will call for your release. By promising to pack you off to a convent for the rest of your life, I am certain that he will prevent matters being taken any further. In the event, you will disappear; he will hand you into my keeping and I will undertake to hide you until such time as a change of circumstances enables me to restore your freedom. But during your detention, you will

belong to me. I make no bones of it: you will be a slave and subject to my whims which you will satisfy without demur. You understand me, Sophie, for you know me well enough. Come, choose now between this course and the scaffold—and do not make me wait for an answer.’

‘O Reverend Father!’ I replied in horror, ‘But you are a monster to take such cruel advantage of my situation to force me thus to choose between death and dishonour! Leave this place! I shall die innocent, but I shall at least die without remorse!’

My resistance excited the villain who thereupon was bold enough to show me just how inflamed his passions were. The vile man had the gall to think of the rites of love in that place of dread and chains beneath the sword of justice which was waiting to strike me down. I tried to escape his embrace, but he came after me and knocked me down on to the miserable straw pallet which did service as a bed, and if he did not quite consummate his crime, then at least he left me bearing marks so unambiguous that I could have no possible doubts as to the abhorrent nature of his intentions.

‘Listen,’ he said, brushing himself down, ‘you clearly do not want my help. Very well, I shall leave you to it. I shall neither help nor hinder, but if you take it into your pretty head to breathe a single word against me, then I shall charge you with crimes so heinous that I shall ensure that you will be left with no means of ever defending yourself again. Think hard before you answer and try to grasp the meaning of what I shall tell the gaoler. Or else I shall put the final touches to your downfall.’

He knocked on the cell door and the gaoler appeared:

‘Sir,’ the villain said, ‘this good woman was mistaken. She wished to speak to a Father Antonin who is now at Bordeaux. I neither know her nor have I ever known her. She asked me to hear her confession and this I have done. You are acquainted with the law which respects the confessional and I have therefore nothing to say of what passed in confidence between us. I give you both good-day. I shall always be ready to present myself here should my holy ministrations be judged necessary.’

So saying, Antonin went out, leaving me as disconcerted by his double-dealing as I was dumbfounded by his sheer impudence and licentiousness.

The lower courts have no equal in the speedy dispatch of their work. As they are almost invariably composed of fools, cloddish martinets, or brutal fanatics, whose inane judgements will almost certainly later be reviewed and corrected by more intelligent eyes, there is nothing to restrain them whenever they have an opportunity to show their stupidity. I was thus unanimously sentenced to death by the eight or ten shop-keepers who sat on the worthy bench in this town of bankrupts, and was immediately transported to Paris for my conviction to be confirmed. The bitterest and most anguished thoughts rose up in me to finish off my much battered heart.

‘Under what fatal star was I then born,’ I asked myself, ‘for it now to be impossible for me even to think of following the smallest inclination to virtue without its being immediately washed away by a tide of woe! And how can it be that enlightened Providence, whose justice I willingly adore, punishing me for my virtues, simultaneously offers me the spectacle of those whose vices brought me low being raised on high to pinnacles? When I was very young, a money-lender attempted to persuade me to commit a theft: I refused, he grew rich, and I came close to hanging. Convicted robbers tried to ravish me in a forest because I would not join them: they prospered while I fell into the clutches of a lewd Marquis who gave me a hundred lashes because I would not poison his mother. Next, I went to the house of a surgeon: I saved him from committing an execrable crime which the brute repaid by butchering, branding, and ejecting me; he doubtless went on to complete further crimes and made his fortune while I was forced to beg



for bread. I was then of a mind to partake of the sacrament and to offer fervent prayers to the Supreme Being who had visited as much misfortune upon me as these men had done. The august tribunal which I hoped would purify me through the workings of one of its holiest mysteries, viz., confession, became instead the ghastly scene of my undoing and my dishonour: the monster who defiled and befouled me was thereupon raised to the highest honours while I fell back into the dismal pit of my wretchedness. I gave money to alleviate the sufferings of a poor woman who promptly robbed me. I went to the aid of an unconscious man, and the scoundrel set me turning a wheel like some beast of burden and beat me mercilessly when my strength gave out: yet all of fortune's favours were showered on him while I came near to forfeiting my life for having been forced to work in his service. An abominable woman sought to involve me in another crime: but, for a second time, I lost everything I possessed because I tried to protect her victim's money and keep him safe from harm; the luckless man offered to reward me with marriage but died in my arms before we could be betrothed. I risked my life in a fire to save a child who was not mine: for doing as much I found myself a third time with head bowed before the sword of Themis. I begged protection of a cur who had dishonoured me, hoping to find him sympathetic to the extent of my misfortunes; yet it was at the cost of my being further dishonoured that the ogre offered to help me. O Providence! am I finally to doubt of your justice? Or what even greater horrors would have scourged me had I always, like those who have persecuted me, paid homage to vice?"

Such, Madame, were the imprecations which, against my better self—their being torn from deep inside me by dread of my impending fate—I had the temerity to utter. And then you had the kindness to turn a glance of pity and compassion upon me. Pray forgive me, Madame, for having presumed so long on your patience. I have reopened my wounds and I have troubled your peace of mind, and these are the only fruits which we both have picked out of the sorry tale of my adventures. The sun is rising, my guards will come for me, let me go now to meet my death. I no longer fear it, for it will abridge my sufferings, nay will end them. Death is to be feared only by those fortunate enough to lead pure, cloudless lives. But the wretched creature who has trodden on serpents, whose bleeding feet have stepped only on thorns, who has become acquainted with human nature only to learn how to hate humankind, who has seen the sun rise only to loathe its rising, whose cruel reverses have separated her from parents, fortune, help, protection, and friends, who in the great wide world has only tears for drink and tribulations for meat, a wretched creature such as this, I say, sees death draw near without fear, welcomes it as a safe haven where she will once more know peace in the bosom of a God too just to allow innocence, blighted and persecuted on this earth, to be denied some day the reward of its tears in heaven.

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The honest Monsieur de Corville had not sat through this tale without being prodigiously moved by it. As for Madame de Lorsange, whose sensibility, as we have said, had not been blunted by the monstrous errors of her youth, she was almost reduced to a swooning state.

'Mademoiselle,' she said to Sophie, 'it is difficult to hear you and not be moved to feel the keenest interest in your case. But I must confess, a sentiment which I cannot explain, keener still than that interest I defined a moment since, draws me irresistibly to you and makes your misfortunes mine. You have kept your name from me, Sophie, you have concealed the truth of your birth. Tell me the secret, I beg you. Do not think it is idle curiosity which prompts me to ask this of you. If what I suspect should be true . . . O Justine! If only you were my sister!'

‘Justine! Madame, what name . . .?’

‘She would be your age now.’

‘O Juliette, is that you whose voice I hear?’ said the ill-starred prisoner throwing herself into the arms of Madame de Lorsange. ‘You! My sister! Great God! But what blasphemy have I committed in doubting Providence! Ah! I shall die less wretched now that I have been allowed to embrace you once more!’

And the two sisters, their arms tightly encircling each other, spoke only through sobs and heard each other only in their tears. Monsieur de Corville, incapable of stopping up his eyes and perceiving that he could not but take the most pressing interest in these events, immediately left the chamber and entered an adjacent room. There he wrote to the Lord Chancellor, painting the wretched Justine’s ghastly fate in strokes of blood and offering to stand as guarantor for her innocence. He petitioned that until a full investigation into her trial was complete, the alleged criminal be detained in his chateau and nowhere else, and signed an undertaking to give her up immediately on receipt of his Lordship’s order requiring him to do so. Having written his letter, he gave it into the keeping of the two escorts, made himself known to them, ordered them to deliver it immediately to its destination and to return. Then, if the Chief Magistrate gave his authorization, they were to carry the prisoner to his residence. The two men, seeing that they were dealing with a person of consequence, did not fear that they would be compromised by obeying his instructions. In the mean time, a carriage drew up at the ready.

‘So beautiful and so ill-used!’ said Monsieur de Corville to Justine who was still locked in her sister’s arms. ‘Come. The past quarter of an hour has wrought a transformation in your affairs. It must not be said that your virtues will never find their reward on this earth, nor that you met only with hearts of flint. Come, follow me. You are my prisoner. Henceforth I alone shall answer for you.’

Then Monsieur de Corville spoke briefly of what he had just arranged.

‘Dear, worthy man!’ said Madame de Lorsange, throwing herself to the ground at her lover’s feet, ‘this is the finest thing you ever did in your life! He alone can avenge the innocent oppressed and succour the unfortunate undone by fate who truly understands both the hearts of men and the spirit of the law. See now your prisoner stand before you! Come, Justine, come! Make haste to kiss the feet of this even-handed protector who, unlike the others you have known, will never desert you! O sir! If the chains of my love were dear to me before, how much more precious will they be henceforth now that they are bedecked by Nature’s garlands and drawn tighter by my affection and esteem!’

And both women vied with each other to kiss the feet of so generous a benefactor and moistened them with their tears. Then they made their departure. Monsieur de Corville and Madame de Lorsange took the greatest pleasure in guiding Justine’s passage from the depths of misfortune to the heights of ease and prosperity. They took delight in feeding her the most succulent dishes, they gave her the softest beds to sleep in, they urged her to use what was theirs as though it were her own: in short, they used her with as much niceness of feeling as could possibly be expected of any two sensitive spirits. During those first days, she was given the attentions of a physician. She was bathed, given fine clothes to wear, and made to appear to advantage. She was worshipped by the two lovers who competed in the race to make her forget her trials. A skilled practitioner undertook to remove all trace of the ignominious brand, cruel legacy of Rodin’s villainy. Everything proceeded as Madame de Lorsange and her delicate lover wished. Already the furrows etched by misfortune were fading from gentle Justine’s exquisite brow whose smoothness was being repaired by the graces; the ghastly white of her alabaster

cheeks was ousted by the roses of spring; the smile long since wiped from her lips now returned on the wings of pleasure. The news from Paris could not have been better, for Monsieur de Corville had roused the whole of France and fanned the zeal of Monsieur S. who now worked with him to make Justine's misfortunes known and restore to her the tranquillity which was also her due. Finally, there came letters from the King which overturned all the verdicts unjustly made against her since childhood, restored her to full citizenship, silenced in perpetuity all the courts of his Kingdom which had plotted against an unfortunate, and granted her a pension of 1,200 livres to be paid for out of the monies seized in the coiners' eyrie in the Dauphiné. She almost died of joy on learning of such flattering developments. For several days together she wept the sweetest tears in the home of her protectors and then, so unaccountably that the cause of it was not to be discovered, her mood changed. She became sad, troubled, dreamy. Sometimes she wept in her friends' company, and could not herself have said what was the reason for her tears.

'I was not born to be so deliriously happy,' she would sometimes say to Madame de Lorsange. 'O dear sister! Such felicity is not made to last!'

Vainly was it put to her that, her tribulations now being over, she now had no further cause for anxiety of any sort. In drawing up the statements made on her behalf, the care which had been taken to avoid mention of any of the persons with whom she had been implicated, whose influence was still to be feared, was another reason for her being easy in her mind. Yet she was not to be persuaded. It was as though the poor girl, destined to know nothing but unhappiness and eternally sensing the hand of misfortune poised above her ready to strike, had some intimation of the final blow by which she was to be cut down.

Madame de Lorsange was still in residence in the country. It was the end of summer. A stroll was mooted which was made doubtful by the gathering of a violent storm. The heat being extreme, every window in the drawing room was open. The lightning flashed, hail fell, the wind howled and shrieked, and the thunder roared alarmingly. Madame de Lorsange quaked. Always terrified by thunder, Madame de Lorsange beseeched her sister to close up all the windows as quickly as she could. Monsieur de Corville came into the room just at this moment. Bent on allaying her sister's fears without delay, Justine flew to a window where she struggled for a whole minute against the wind which resisted her efforts. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck her and hurled her clear to the middle of the room where she lay lifeless on the floor.

Madame de Lorsange uttered a piteous cry, then fainted. Monsieur de Corville summoned help which was divided between the two casualties. Madame de Lorsange was revived but the hapless Justine had been so comprehensively struck down that there was not even the smallest hope remaining for her. The bolt had entered by her right breast, had blasted her thorax and come out again through her mouth, so disfiguring her face that she was hideous to look at. Monsieur de Corville thought it best that she be carried off without delay, but Madame de Lorsange, with an air of the greatest calm, rose to her feet and countermanded the order.

'No,' said she to her lover. 'No, leave her a moment where I may see her. I need her there to gaze upon so that I may be confirmed in the resolve which I have this moment made. Pray hear me out, sir, and do not obstruct the course I propose to follow, for nothing now shall deter me from it. The unprecedented misfortunes experienced by this benighted creature, though she ever respected virtue, are far too removed from the ordinary run not to open my eyes upon my own case. Do not think, sir, that I am blinded by the glimpses of that sham of happiness which, throughout all her adventures, we have observed to be the lot of the wicked men who plagued her. They are whims of fate, puzzles invented by Providence which it is not for us to try to

penetrate nor should they ever tempt us. The prosperity enjoyed by wicked men is a test which Providence sets us. It is as the lightning whose beguiling flashes lend momentary beauty to the air before hurling headlong into death's chasm the unhappy man who is dazzled by its brilliance. We have before us an example of it. The chain of calamities, the dreadful, uninterrupted misfortunes of this poor girl are a warning which Almighty God has given me to repent of my ways, to heed the voice of remorse and fly at last to His bosom. How much must I fear at His hands, I whose crimes would appal you if you ever came to know them, I, whose lewdness, irreligion, and rejection of all decent principles have marked each step I have taken in life. What should I expect, then, if one such as this, who never once in her life knowingly committed a blameworthy act, has been so categorically treated? Let us part, sir; the time is ripe. There being no tie that binds us, forget me and allow me to go to a place where, repenting eternally at the feet of God Almighty, I may abjure the wicked actions by which I have debased myself. This catastrophe, though so dreadful for me, was nevertheless necessary for my redemption in this life and for the happiness for which I hope in the life that is to come. Farewell, sir, you will never see me more. The last gesture of friendship I ask of you is to promise you will never undertake any kind of investigation with the object of discovering what has become of me. I shall await you in a better world, for your virtues will assuredly bring you to it. May the mortifications in which I shall spend such wretched years as are left me in expiation of my crimes allow me indeed to see you there some day.

Madame de Lorsange left the house at once, ordered a carriage to be made ready, took some small provision of her money with her, leaving the rest for Monsieur de Corville to whom she gave directions concerning pious bequests to be made, and drove in haste to Paris where she entered the Carmelite Convent there. Within the space of a few years, she had become its model and example, known not only for her deep piety but also for the serenity of her spirit and the unimpeachable propriety of her morals.

Monsieur de Corville, a man deserving of the highest offices in his native land, was honoured to obtain them and accepted with the sole object of working for the happiness of the people, the glory of his sovereign, and the fortune of his friends.

And now, reader, having read this tale, may you extract the same profit from it as this reformed woman of the world. May you, like her, be persuaded that true happiness lies in virtue alone and that, though God allows goodness to be persecuted on earth, it is with no other end in view than to prepare for us a better reward in heaven.

Written in the space of two weeks,  
this eighth day of July 1787.